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IN A VAIN SHADOW.

A ~~Plot~~ *Novel*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

EVANGELINE F. SMITH.

"This should have been a noble creature: he
Hath all the energy which would have made
A goodly frame of glorious elements,
Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,
It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—
And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts—
Mix'd and contending without end or order,
All dormant or destructive: he will perish,
And yet he must not; * * * * *
For such are worth redemption.

BYRON.

VOL. III.

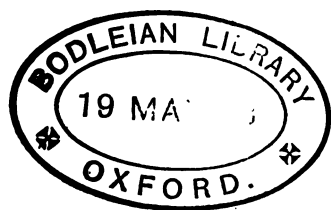
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IN A VAIN SHADOW.

CHAPTER I.

To sit and curb the soul's mute rage,
That preys upon itself alone;
To curse the life which is the cage
Of fettered grief that dares not moan.
Hiding from many a careless eye,
The scornèd load of agony.

SHELLEY.

THE afternoon was closing in—wet and dreary—with a moaning wind, which drove the rain in sheets across wood and moorland, and heavy clouds, which, like a grey cotton umbrella, hung over the earth to keep it from any glimpse of the sun's rays. It was an ugly, hopeless, pitiless, drenching downpour—a downpour that wetted to the skin, that brought down the leaves prematurely from the chestnuts, and piled them in rotten heaps beneath, that pattered dismally against roofs and windows, and made streets and gutters run with mud. Dismal was the whole town of St. Dunstan's, its dismality culminating in the railway station. It was too early in the season for fires, and the waiting-room, with its rusty grate, dirty

floor, deal table, ornamented with a big Testament and square dingy water bottle, and its company of solemn females, laden with newspaper parcels, was a depressing sight indeed. The sharp sound of the bell, announcing that the expected train had come in sight, created a diversion among the silent unsociables. A porter who had been lounging at the station entrance, interchanging laconic observations with the omnibus conductor, popped in his head to admonish the passengers that it was time to be on the move; and the ladies, each shouldering an umbrella, marched forth to the platform. In came the iron monster, puffing, shrieking; leaving volumes of damp smoke in its wake, and giving vent to a variety of unearthly groans. There was a rush of porters—a ruinous dashing of wet luggage on the platform. Armed, like their sisters of the waiting-room, with waterproofs and cotton umbrellas, a reinforcement of doleful females issued from second and third-class carriages, and on all sides re-echoed despondent enquiries for the 'bus. One first-class carriage alone appeared to be occupied, and the group it disgorged was of a more cheerful character. There, large as life, was our friend the Archdeacon, with the same gaiters and guide-book, and arriving by the self-same train which had brought him to St. Dunstan's when we first began to follow his fortunes. There also was Mrs. Egerton,

her carriage bag bursting with presents; Miss Nutting, with her cheap cross; and Geraldine, with cheeks that seemed to glow the more warmly in contrast with the dull drab to which the weather had reduced all less brilliant complexions. She had held her head so long out of the window, eager to catch the first glimpse of the Castle towers, that the long black feather in her hat was drenched and straight, and the rain-drops glistened on her lashes.

Between the start of the great ponderous landau, which was waiting at the station entrance, and the arrival at the Castle, lay near an hour's drive; and Geraldine, untroubled by any sensations of nervousness, chattered and laughed with an almost wild merriment, and looked to this side and to that for the familiar sights of the streets. Her father, who began to realise more vividly than he had yet done the momentous change coming over his child's life, and who was oppressed with an undefined anxiety, was a little distressed that her position did not sit more gravely on her. Why this anxiety should suddenly steal into his heart he knew not. Except for certain rumours that undue harshness had caused young Berkeley's flight from home, the Archdeacon had seen and heard nothing to excite uneasiness as to the character of his future son-in-law. In a worldly point of view, Geraldine's circumstances would be brilliant. She was devoted

heart and soul to her betrothed husband, and it was self-evident that no motive but personal attachment could have induced him to ask in marriage a girl half his own age, and with neither fortune nor splendour of position to recommend her. Yes, the more her father reflected, the more unreasonable did these new-born misgivings appear—misgivings so out of harmony with that smiling face opposite, every line of which seemed instinct with hope, confidence, and joy.

“O, papa!” she exclaimed, as they drove past the Abbey, “what a sad contrast this is to our last arrival here! How you will miss your dear friend, Dr. Bogle’s welcome, and liberal housekeeping; above all, the chance of hearing from him the exact truth on all controverted questions.”

“Now, my Diney,” exclaimed Mrs. Eger-ton, “you just remind me of a little word of warning I meant to give you. Remember that now you do not come to Rotherhame as a passing stranger, who will go away and leave no trace behind; your home in the future lies in this place, and it behoves you, my child, to let by-gones be by-gones, and to do all that in you lies to promote peace and goodwill. Every allowance should be made for any little infirmities of temper in the poor Doctor, considering the terrible trial he was called on to pass through in the loss of his exemplary wife. Those poor girls too, left motherless at such an age. Put yourself

in their place, and try to do all you can to add to their happiness."

"The greatest kindness I could do them would be to take them away from their father's society as often as possible," answered Geraldine stubbornly. "I wonder if he has modified the conscientious objections he informed papa he had against our being together, since he has heard that I am actually to have the honour of living up at the Castle with 'the Earl' and 'the Family.'"

"That is another of your satirical speeches, Geraldine," said her father. "Why cannot your jokes be good-natured, my dear child?"

"Dr. Bogle's weaknesses are not of the kind to which one is disposed to be good-natured," she answered. "However, my darling ones, I will try to do all you wish. I think I am really too happy at present to find it hard to forgive any one, though I fear I could not yet make up my mind to endure civilly the presence of that odious Robert!"

"Look at home, dear Geraldine, and then you won't be so ready to find fault with others," said Nina, in accents of playful reproof. "Don't let's say any more on the subject, since it draws you on to use strong language; let's talk instead about the interesting objects we are passing through. I remember so well, dear Mrs. Egerton, how last time we came the Archdeacon pointed

out all the archæological titbits, and how he opened my eyes to appreciate the architectural beauties of this fine old street. Let me see," she continued, with laboured enthusiasm, "he said that that old building was Gothic, did he not? and that other"—

"The term Gothic is quite given up now by archæologists," interposed the Archdeacon, instructively. "Lord Scroll de Parchement, President of the Barfordshire Society, made some valuable remarks on that subject at our last meeting, and on the superficial knowledge of architecture which the use of the term betrays."

"Lord Scroll? The old gentleman with a coat green from antiquity, who looked as if he came out of Noah's ark, and had been preserved in the British Museum ever since," said Geraldine. "What would he term himself? Gothic, Early English, or Antediluvian, I wonder? Here we are in the forest;" and her voice involuntarily took a graver tone as they passed from the open road into the shadow of the autumnal trees. "How dreary and discoloured it all looks. I should think even the blood-stained waters in Culpepper's Bowl would turn grey this evening."

"Ah! that story has always left a deep impression on my mind," said the Archdeacon, with a gleam of enjoyment. "I shall hope to hear it from Rotherhame's own

lips. He is just the person to do full justice to a tale of tragedy."

"De-ar Mrs. Egerton!" interrupted Nina, getting up a blush, and pillowing her cheek on that lady's shoulder, "I am so very, very happy to think that you and the Archdeacon so fully approve of dear Herbie. He is *so*, *so* kind and loving, and yet so thoroughly the priest! And I do indeed share your joy, dearest Mrs. Egerton, that Geraldine should have gained the heart of so very zealous a church-helper as Lord Rotherhame. It does all seem so truly nice and satisfactory."

Miss Nutting's fits of enthusiasm often had the effect of rubbing her hearers the wrong way up. Mrs. Egerton received her felicitations without much responsive warmth, enduring her caresses, and responding to them in a manner so pre-occupied as presently to draw from the little governess an apology more provoking than the offence for which it was offered.

Absorbed by a mental scheme she was concocting for lionising a distant part of the country during her stay at Rotherhame, Mrs. Egerton was only vaguely conscious of a distracting buzzing in her ears; and ere long, absently pushed off the intruding cheek as she might have repelled the encroachments of a persistent mosquito. Thus repulsed, Nina settled herself upon the Archdeacon, and compelled him to drop an interesting article

he was perusing to listen to various edifying, but pointless little extracts from her new number of the *Earnest Churchwoman*. She read on perseveringly till she discovered that she had read him to sleep, and then persecuted Geraldine, who sat silently indulging a delicious day-dream, with anxious numberless enquiries as to whether the Archdeacon had not thought her forward. Geraldine armed her soul with patience. She felt that Nina no longer regarded her as a pupil, but rather as a sister bride-elect, and that she reckoned upon finding sympathy and fellow-feeling in her. Fortunately, there was no rivalry between the two young ladies. Geraldine was fully satisfied with her own choice, and as for Nina, she would not have exchanged her High Church curate for the greatest lay bridegroom in Europe. The holy horror with which the members of her family, from their varying ecclesiastical standpoints, united in regarding Herbie's priestly pretensions, served but to heighten the romance of the situation; and she entertained a sublime pity for all the forlorn young persons who, like poor Miss Bartholomew, must now be mourning him as one for ever lost to them. Ever and anon, as they discussed the Reverend Herbert's perfections and chances of preferment, Geraldine's heart would throb wildly at the prospect of the fast approaching meeting with her future husband. She was a little afraid of him—of this reserved,

peculiar man, so much older and more cultured than herself, who hid beneath a gentle exterior passions so strong, and whose heart, as he had himself confessed, was not entirely hers. Was it not something of a risk to leave her peaceful, indulgent home, for all life, to give herself to one for whose deeper requirements she might prove inadequate? To all misgivings, however, her answer was that she loved, and that apart from him who was her sun, existence would be an arctic waste.

It was a mournful evening for a first arrival at a new home. The clouds were parting a little in the west, and the sunset was of a dull and angry red. In the forest it was nearly dark. A rotting scent arose from the soaked bracken and dead leaves drowning in the rain pools. Two black ravens swept on their gloomy way above the carriage, and seemed to pursue it with their warning croak. The wind was rising, and all the branches groaned and creaked. Whether it was the knowledge that the children whose young presence had filled it with mirth were absent, and their rooms deserted, which gave her the impression, she could scarcely tell, but the Castle, as they approached, seemed to wear an exceptionally lonely and forsaken air. The flag, that announced the presence of its master, drooped disconsolately on the Keep, and through the intervening rain-clouds scarce a ray was

visible of the red fire and candle-light that, here and there, between the mullions of the ivied casements, stole forth into the autumn evening.

A silence fell, as by general consent, upon the travellers. The grim walls, that had witnessed the rise and fall of so many centuries, so many human lives, with all the loves and sorrows they enshrined, seemed to be watching the opening of this new episode in their history with a sardonic silent mockery.

Or was it Old Time himself, whose sarcastic smile, playing upon the senseless stone and mortar, imparted to them apparent consciousness—Old Time, who with capricious tenderness had long spared this relic of past ages from the wanton stroke of his fatal hand, and who now, hiding among its turrets, grinned maliciously at the fresh tragi-comedy he was to watch to its close on the stage of human life. The players, at all events, as is the duty of their calling, played their parts as if it were all serious earnest, and the curtain would never fall upon the drama.

Before the carriage stopped, the footman had sprung down from the box, and rung the bell; the next moment the heavy door was opened, and behind the servants, who came hurrying forward, Geraldine discerned the figure of her betrothed husband.

For an instant his appearance startled her, he looked so marble-pale, and there was such a smileless gravity in his sunken eyes.

He had been passing through a day of awful pain, one of those days which came to him at intervals like recurrent attacks of ague, in which Fate seemed to require of him with interest his intervening periods of comparative immunity. These storms, when they passed, left exhaustion behind, and gave him for awhile the look of one whom lightning has scathed. It was his custom, when they overtook him, to shut himself away from every human eye, and endure alone; and it was only a sense of the absolute necessity of welcoming his guests, which this day gave him force to leave his wretched privacy. But neither the warm greetings of the Archdeacon, nor Mrs. Egerton's demonstrative geniality, could avail to bring a smile to his lips, and the touch of his hand, as Geraldine took it, chilled her to the marrow. She answered his greeting with a few timid commonplaces about the journey and the weather, and then, impelled by a rush of pity, strong and untutored as the heart from which it sprang, she took his hand and kissed it.

In that house, where demonstration of feeling had long been at a discount, this spontaneous act of love came like a sudden thaw. Lord Rotherhame started as though a touch had been laid on his inward wound, but it had been a touch of healing. Warmth and life seemed to pass from her lips into the fibres of his being, and a wistful gladness

lighted up his brow. He clasped her hand tightly, as though he would fain not let her go, and his eyes spoke gratitude.

They went into the library and gathered round a fire of blazing logs. Lord Rotherham still kept Geraldine's hand, and though his silent fit had not yet passed, he listened with an air of growing pleasure to Mrs. Egerton's cheerful flow of talk, and her husband's hearty expressions of satisfaction at finding himself at last warmly housed after the fatigues and disagreeables of the long wet journey. Geraldine scarcely spoke, but her heart was brimming over. The hand she held thrilled her with electric excitement, and mingling with her more passionate feelings was one quite new—a sense of responsibility, half wife-like, half maternal in its protecting tenderness towards this being, whom God had given her to cherish and to soothe.

After a short conversation Lord Rotherham lit a candle and led the way up a winding staircase.

"I have put you all together in the Ruby Tower," he said, "for I notice that people when they come here seem to like to huddle together in colonies."

Rich firelight, stealing out through open doors, illumined the rough stone walls, and each chamber, as they entered it, seemed the quintessence of old-fashioned comfort. Geraldine's small room was reached by a tiny corkscrew flight made in the thickness

of the wall, and the low oaken door, with its prison-like aspect, and huge bolts, captivated her imagination. She stood with her host beneath the arched roof of a hexagonal recess, and through the window, whence in olden times the castellan had often watched the advance of an invading host, gazed out upon the darkening sky. The wind was driving the rain in sheets across the country, and the purple of the heath-clad hills was changing into black.

"Oh, don't those torn clouds, flying across the sky towards the red furnace in the west, look like lost souls going to perdition?" she exclaimed, with dilating eyes.

The simile chimed in too well with Lord Rotherhame's thoughts for him to relish it.

"That notion infects the scene with wretchedness," he said; "you should not blacken Nature with the shadow of human woe."

"Let us say then that the elements are at their games—the wind chasing the clouds, the clouds the sun, and the sun hiding himself behind the world," she answered quickly, "or, better still, let us turn our eyes altogether from the dismal outside scene, and revel in the cosiness of this snug room. This tapestry will frighten me at night, I fear—all those quaint figures seen in the uncertain firelight. I must get Miss Nutting to come and sleep with me, that my enjoyment may not be spoiled by inconvenient terrors."

"What life you all bring into this dull place!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, following her across the room to a ponderous oak chest which her parents were examining. "You have no notion how gloomy your rooms seemed when I came to inspect them early this afternoon, and found them empty; the mice nibbling in the wainscot, and the wind shrieking down the stairs."

He did not tell them of the other sounds his heart had caught in the long hours of that lonely afternoon—sounds whose echo alone lingered on the air, of voices long hushed, of beloved footsteps which had once trodden those floors, but which would henceforward sound on them no more for ever.

"Oh, I don't think the antiquity of my apartments will trouble me with any uncomfortable thoughts," said Mrs. Egerton, turning on him her rosy face, which, beaming like the morning sun, seemed, in truth, potent to scare away any number of ghosts. "When do you dine, my dear Lord Rotherhame? I like to know the exact hour, that I may be down to the moment."

Lord Rotherhame smiled, recalling sundry complaints uttered by Dr. Bogle the previous Christmas with respect to his guests' hopeless indifference to times and seasons—Mrs. Egerton in particular, in sublime unconsciousness of the enormity she was committing, frequently choosing the moment when the joint was being brought in for

early dinner, to start forth on a peregrination through the village.

"I ordered it to-night at half-past seven," he replied, "but now that you are here I hope that you will make your own arrangements. I am a bad hand at hospitable contrivances, but at least I can obey orders."

He went below with Mrs. Egerton to see her comfortably established in her quarters, and Geraldine and Ninnie, having removed their wet garments, sat down to rest in two arm-chairs by a glowing fire, and recruit their drooping powers by the refreshment of coffee and muffins, talk and sleep.

Much to the disappointment of Miss Nutting, who had been nourishing hopes that Herbie's presence would have graced the occasion, the only outsider at the dinner-table was Mr. Daubeney. It was some consolation, however, to find any member of the priesthood there, and she talked fast to the Chaplain, who, endeavouring to banish all untimely melancholy from his face, strove valiantly to make himself agreeable. Again and again he found his eyes involuntarily resting on the face of the young girl who was to take his dead friend's place. Despite all opposing prepossessions, he could but admit to himself that she was beautiful, and that the soul which shone through her blue eyes was pure and bright. With secret wonder he listened to the merry ring of her laugh, and beheld Lord Rotherhame's sad face gladdened

with such warm pleasure as a traveller might wear, who, on a dark night, comes in from a snowstorm to stand beside a fire.

There was a blank on the wall opposite his chair, which Daubeney discovered with a sudden shock. Lady Rotherhame's portrait was gone. True to his resolve not to do the thing by halves, and feeling that he should not be able to bear the sight of her portrait when her successor had come to take her place, Lord Rotherhame had that morning ordered its removal. But the precious miniature, which he had worn on his breast since his betrothal-day, still kept its place. It would rise and fall with every beat of his heart till that heart was still, and it would find a burial-place among his ashes.

One episode in that, her first evening in her future home, recurred to Geraldine afterwards with peculiar and rather painful interest. Chaperoned by Miss Nutting, she had accompanied Lord Rotherhame on a candle-light exploration of the Castle. They had penetrated into all the odd nooks and corners, routed up rats and beetles, peeped into the ruins, invaded the cloistral offices and suites of musty, locked-up bedrooms. They had listened in the picture gallery to sad and evil histories of the fair ladies and quaint children who impassively watched them from the painted canvass ; they had shuddered to think what awful details those old walls might contribute, could they but

4 break their stony silence and tell what they had witnessed. Mrs. Egerton had come at last to fetch them, for the hour was drawing towards midnight, and the party in the Drawing Room wearying for the night's repose. Lingered a little on her way, Geraldine was following her mother up the stairs, when a hand was laid detainingly upon her arm, and she saw Lord Rotherham looking at her with a gaze so intent in its wistful earnestness that it almost startled her.

"What is the matter?" she asked, with nervous anxiety.

"Nothing," he replied.

"But I am sure there is! What makes you look so strange all at once?"

"I was wondering whether you would ever bring yourself to bear it," he answered, slowly, "you who come from such a free, merry home, you, who to-night have so often called it gloomy and dreadful. How will you bear year after year to breathe its sad atmosphere? Do you not feel that there are spectres in this thick air—haunting spectres of crime done, and misery suffered? Do you feel any shade of mis-giving, Geraldine? Do you in the least repent?"

She read trouble in his eyes, and felt that the hand she held was dry and hot. It was impossible to hear the tremulous earnestness of his tones and give him a light reply.

"No such thought ever crossed me, Kenelm. I love the house for its own sake; but if it were a prison, or a mad-house, it would be Heaven shared with you."

"A mad-house or a prison?" he repeated, gloomily. "Words are easy."

"Love makes deeds as easy. Do not allow yourself to be tormented by thoughts of the past, however sad. Such dull vapours are half the product of our own imaginations, and what we make we can surely destroy. Let us create fresh associations for ourselves, and fill the old house anew with memories of love and kindness."

"I will do all that in me lies towards laying the ghosts that trouble it!" was his rejoinder. "*That* much I owe you, and henceforward my duty to you transcends all other obligations!"

He spoke positively, like one who would keep down doubts by force. Then stooping, he kissed her cheek. It was to him a sacramental kiss, in which, for the remainder of his days, he devoted conscience, soul, and self blindly to her service.

Geraldine guessed nothing of the guilt that kiss implied. And yet that night she stood long before her window, perplexed and too full of thought to sleep. The downpour had ceased, and the stars, emerging from moment to moment from behind the black, rapid clouds, glassed themselves in the rain-pools below. The sharp lines of the towers

and walls of defence which girded the Castle were rendered indistinct by the creeping ivy that canopied their battlements and the dream-like darkness that wrapped them round. A deep, monotonous cry from the bloodhounds' distant kennels, blended with the hooting of owls and the stormy sighing of the wind, made up together that profound and sombre harmony of night which snares the soul to fearful musings. Geraldine's face became sadder as she looked and listened, and she involuntarily trembled as she remembered that the promised bliss which filled her with such wild longing of desire was not yet securely in her grasp. But the moment that her transient melancholy took this tangible shape, the young girl, in love with happiness, flung it from her, and turning in displeasure from the scene which had engendered it, let the curtains drop, and returned to the fireside to distract herself with the harmless chatter of her voluble companion.

CHAPTER II.

Many a green isle there must be
In the deep wide sea of misery.

SHELLEY.

"DINEY," said Lord Rotherhame next morning, "your mother insists upon it that you are to pay your respects at the Rectory on your way home."

They had been for more than two hours out of doors, revelling in the exhilarating freshness of a glorious October morning. The distance lay veiled in a grey mist, which deepened towards the horizon into a mellow purple haze. The slant sun-rays fell warmly on the reddening trees and hedges laden with blackberries, and the dew shimmered thick and white upon the turf. Deep into the forest, beneath the shade of stately oaks and arching beeches, Geraldine had wandered, delighting Lord Rotherhame by her eager appreciation of his beloved glades. The Archdeacon, her mother, and Miss Nutting followed at a respectful distance. The little party had started together, but her impatience had carried her in advance of her parents. They had been the round of the stables, where Lord Rotherhame had bestowed upon his future bride a small but beautiful black mare, a creature with the spirit of a

tiger and the gentleness of a lamb, who had greeted his young mistress with a proud arch of the neck and an attempted lick of the hand. They had gone to the school, where the children, staring at the intruders with round, fixed eyes, had been put through the regulation exhibition of marching, singing, and reading aloud, and now they were hastening down the quaint village street, past white-washed cottages, little gardens gay with sun-flowers, and diamond-paned windows under low-browed eaves, through which the villagers were peeping curiously at the future Countess. At last, on the village green, where once the penal stocks had stood, and the blacksmith now struck his merry anvil, they had paused before the familiar Rectory gate.

"I kept your mother's orders a secret till this moment you see," said Lord Rotherhame, "fearing that you might bolt, or attempt some other rebellious action. Will you be generous now, Diney, and forgive your enemy? I can answer for him that the worthy Rector will be penitent from the depths of his heart, and from what I know of you I should think you would find it difficult to keep anger long."

"Indeed you don't know me!" she answered seriously, as if defending herself from some injurious imputation. "I don't find it at all easy to forgive Dr. Bogle. I have promised mamma to try, and so I will!"

"I am glad of that," said Lord Rotherhame. "I have always kept on good terms with the spiritual authorities of the parish, and hope I may do so still. To see squire and parson squabbling tends to shake the people's faith in the infallibility of Church and State."

"That must have been done for them already if Miss Bartholomew has promulgated her political beliefs among them," answered Geraldine, laughing. "She is a most uncompromising Radical, and Miss Barnes told us that she wanted Dr. Bogle to let her give a public lecture in the schoolroom on 'Women's Rights.'"

"Women can little know the divinity that doth hedge them," returned Lord Rotherhame, "or they would not wish to come down from the sacred heights and soil their hands with the dusty work of the world."

"Is it your idea, then, that women should abide, like the Hindoo divinity, in a state of blessed inactivity? Do you really think that idleness and perpetual torpor are essential attributes of womanly perfection?"

"No, I would not have them idle, but their calling is the high work of ruling hearts. Their influence, subtle as electricity, can only be properly felt in the delicate regions of moral life, and would be altogether lost in the smoke and scurry of political conflict. Women should be like standards round whose uplifted folds armies may gather, like

saints raised on high, to be invoked, to guide, and bless."

Geraldine laughed.

"I begin to feel in high spirits," she answered. "With such principles you will not, of course, feel yourself entitled to attempt interference with my liberties, or dispute any axiom that I am pleased to lay down."

Lord Rotherhame joined in her laugh.

"Don't be too sure of that," he said. "Do you not know that certain heathen punish their gods with neglect and stripes if they do not promptly grant their prayers? Moreover, let me inform you, little Republican, that liberty means one thing for the unmarried and something very different for the wife. She, indeed, may be *free*, but it is in virtue of her dual life, her will having its seat in her husband, that other self with whom marriage has made her one."

"One may press figures too far," responded Geraldine. "Marriage may indeed unite people in name, interest, and companionship. But although two natures may touch and join at some given points, at others they must remain for ever apart. What human presence, however close and precious, can enter into that innermost sanctuary where the soul stands solitary before the Face of God?"

"By fire two metals may be fused in one," he persisted. "I tell you that, in the case of a true, ideal marriage, two human beings

become a single self, only richer in gifts than before they fused, and the force which melts one soul into another is the seven-times heated furnace of love."

"But, according to your theory, the pair, although made one, still retain different offices and relative positions. The wife is the head, so to speak, in which all the higher functions of thought and influence are carried on. The husband has the humbler office of keeping mundane matters straight, the common machinery of life in order, and he no more approves of feminine interference in these coarser duties than a cook would tolerate her lady's constant presence in the kitchen."

"Correctly put," he answered. "Let man and woman be each supreme, she in her higher, he in his lower sphere! Mrs. Egerton," he added, as that lady approached, her sketch-book firmly grasped in one hand, while the other hung down under the weight of a heavy bag of fir cones, pebbles, and other keepsakes amassed by the way, "are you really coming into the Rectory?"

She assented cheerfully, and they passed through the green gate, Ninnie in a transport of giggles and blushes imploring Geraldine to keep near her and protect her through the impending ordeal.

"I am so thankful," she whispered, "that we got over the worst of it in London, but those naughty girls are sure not to let an oc-

casion slip for teasing me about Herbie, and I am afraid Miss Bartholomew doesn't half trust me to take proper care of him. She has always revered and loved him so, and I know that, though in one sense her spiritual father, in another he has felt for her an almost filial affection. She is a truly good creature, and I am sure will always be the trusted and honoured friend of our married life."

Meanwhile, in the seclusion of the study, as she was pleased to call her schoolroom, Miss Bartholomew was toiling dutifully at the uphill task of bestowing on her pupils a thorough solid English and foreign education based on Church principles throughout. Little Bluebell stood before her governess, who, with a face wound up into an expression of concentrated endurance, hearkened to her profoundly placid repetition of a closing scene from one of Racine's tragedies, in which hero, heroine, confidante, and the entire *dramatis personæ* fell in quick succession into an untimely grave. Ellen, with knitted brows, pondered an elementary problem of Euclid, which she might have mastered more easily had not Mary at the same time plunged into the crowning variations of Thalberg's "Home, sweet Home," an undertaking disastrously beyond her quiet powers. Mary was never permitted to slacken speed, however, for Miss Bartholomew, resolved on doing her duty thoroughly by the motherless girls, had eyes and ears for each of the three

at once, and by an alarming beating of time upon the table urged the young musician forward, semi-quavers, triplets, and arpeggios tearing one after another in a very fury of confusion. From time to time a momentary spasm would disturb the stony immovability of the governess's sallow countenance, and this was when, glancing involuntarily through the window at the tall solemn trees, with their changing tints, and the mossy sward chequered by glancing lights and shadows, she recalled moments of happy intercourse, dreams of a brighter future than the dull routine of schoolroom life, indulged by the side of one now for ever lost to her. Her pupils knew nothing of the little tragedy enacting within the breast of their prim preceptress, and only whispered to each other that the "old girl" had been growing sourer and more prudish than ever of late! She hid her griefs so well that the Doctor—who, on the announcement of Herbert Meules's engagement, had been disposed to compassionate her—now satisfied himself that they had all been mistaken, and that Miss Bartholomew did in very deed, as well as in profession, care more for her pet doctrine of clerical celibacy than for the personal appropriation of any individual priest. The swing of the garden gate disturbed the academic quiet of the schoolroom, and immediately an unauthorised rush to the window took place.

. The governess was on the point of ordering the girls back to their tasks, when Mary's cry: "Oh, Miss Bartholomew, the Earl and Geraldine!" stopped her, and rising, she herself condescended to join the gazing group.

"It is the Earl certainly, but Miss Egerton! She surely would not choose *this* house to visit at after what your papa thought it right to say to her."

"Yes, but it *is* her, and no mistake!" cried Mary, transported with excitement. "What a pretty holland dress, Ellen! Made in London, I should think. She looks taller and older than when she was here at Christmas."

"Stuck up, I expect!" suggested Ellen. "What can have made Lord Rotherham choose her? I wonder if what Bobby said about her running after him is true; she used to seem too nice for that."

"My dear Ellen"—and Miss Bartholomew laid her hand with affectionate earnestness on her pupil's shoulder—"I pray you may ever continue to think thus, and be preserved from that *depth* of female degradation"—here, on catching sight of Ninnie Nutting ambling behind Geraldine, her voice took a deeper tone—"manœuvring for a husband!"

"They have come in," cried Ellen, as the party disappeared beneath the porch. "I wonder if Aunt Alice will send for us."

"I am sure I hope not," answered Mary. "Geraldine will hardly take the trouble to look at us now. She will have eyes and ears for nothing but the Earl, I suppose; though she wouldn't ever have got to know him at all if it hadn't been for us."

"Revenez tout de suite à vos leçons," interposed the governess, authoritatively. "Marie, au piano! Hélène, reprenez votre ardoise, et ne parlez plus jusqu'à ce que vous ayez accompli votre tâche! Bluebell, le livre! A présent, continuez!"

Ellen sits mutely, rubbing her eyelids. Bluebell resumes her droning repetition. Five minutes pass, in the course of which she has hurried three more leading characters into eternity, and then a swift decided step is heard upon the stairs, the door is flung open, and Ellen finds herself in the grasp of two firm arms, and her pale cheek is warmly pressed by Geraldine's rosy lips. Mary's turn comes next, and it seems as though a beam of sunshine has suddenly fallen into the shabby, shut-up schoolroom, a breath from the green-woods, light and warm and fresh. The girls' heavy countenances are quickened into momentary life; Miss Bartholomew alone grows more forbidding, galled by this unprecedented outrage on scholastic discipline. To enter without a knock, to address her pupils before herself, and with not so much as an apology for the intrusion! Miss Bartholomew would have pronounced an

open rebuke had the offender been any other than the future Countess. Her expression of outraged solemnity recalled Geraldine to her duties, and she turned to shake hands with a conciliatory smile.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Bartholomew, for breaking in upon you in this cool way; but I wanted to take Mary and Ellen by surprise, and Miss Barnes said I might come up. What do you think, Mary, of my having done with lessons for good?" she continued, triumphantly. "I never mean to open Otto or Racine again, and I have given Miss Nutting fair warning that I will commit to the flames that old Universal History with which she has so long tormented us, if ever I catch sight of it in her house here."

"But, surely, Miss Egerton, you do not consider that a young woman's education ends with the schoolroom? Surely, intellectual exercises are not sweets to be sipped merely in the morning of life, but solid food whose nutrition is constantly needful to our mental well-being."

"Yes, I suppose that is true, for one is always being told it," she answered, meekly. "But real life is so absorbing that it is sometimes hard to tear oneself from it to plunge into the affairs of men and women who have been dead and buried so many hundred years, that people seem hardly agreed that they ever really lived at all."

"I am so glad you are coming to live near

us," exclaimed Mary, with a sudden burst of warmth, for Geraldine had taken her hand as she spoke, and her young face was so sweet and glowing that it was impossible for the most frozen not to thaw.

"So am I, Mary, and we will have no end of fun together; you shall come to plenty of nice parties, and I will give you heaps of presents. My allowance will be much larger now; I know Lord Rotherhame intends to give me plenty of pin-money."

"The Earl is coming upstairs, Ellen, with papa and all the others," said Mary, in a stage-aside, and Geraldine saw the transient gleam die out of the sisters' faces, which forthwith relapsed into stolid apathy.

Even the kindly embraces of Mrs. Egerton, in which Miss Bartholomew had her share, failed to reanimate either of the girls, and, save by the tacit acknowledgment of awe-stricken shyness, they both ignored Lord Rotherhame's presence, and obliged him to wedge his hand into theirs by force. But the Doctor made full amends for his daughters' deficiencies. Hurrying forward with a precipitation which compelled all objects, sentient and non-sentient, to give way before him, he approached Geraldine with outstretched hand. One might almost have thought him to have been addressing one of the Ladies Harold themselves, by the religious fervour of his greeting, but that his cordiality seemed

scarcely so spontaneous as on those august occasions.

"Welcome, thrice welcome, dear child!" he cried, "we do, indeed, rejoice to think you are so soon to make your nest amongst us. May Heaven prosper you in your new sphere, and enrich you with every blessing, temporal and spiritual!"

Geraldine's hand slipped coldly from his vehement grasp. Her beautiful lip curled. The Doctor felt instinctively that his part had not been acted with sufficient delicacy. The complete transition of feeling effected in him by the knowledge that the "young person" who had audaciously flouted the irresistible attractions of his son Robert was to become the wife of his patron, and mistress of Rotherham Castle, was, perhaps, to her mind not sufficiently accounted for. An explanation of some sort was needed, but though policy demanded the humiliation, the Doctor revealed by an involuntary glare how much it cost him.

"I have long known, and I may say loved, your excellent father; and any of his family would always be dear to me for his sake. My girls, too, I know are overjoyed at the prospect of having their young friend for a neighbour, and the talk is of little else all day long."

"I suppose I may conclude then, Dr. Bogle, that you have changed the opinion

you expressed about me in London," said Geraldine, with a rather cold gravity.

"Oh-h, of course, my dear; and I can only say I hope you will think no more of that painful misunderstanding!" answered the Doctor, nervously, remembering that he had that very morning at breakfast enlarged to his family on the dead set Geraldine had made at Lord Rotherhame, and the sad want of maidenly feeling which it had revealed.

Geraldine inclined her head, and Mrs. Egerton, looking exceedingly uncomfortable, hastened to divert the Doctor's attention by a welcome remark upon his asters.

Robert, who, anxious to get over his first meeting with Miss Egerton, had slunk into the schoolroom at Miss Barnes' tail, now came forward, awkwardly shook hands, and growled out a sheepish congratulation. This accomplished, he drew back, and endeavoured to keep his ungainly person out of the range of those blue eyes, whose straightforward contempt had once succeeded in piercing even the rhinoceros-hide of his conceit. He addressed himself to Ellen, plying her with remarks upon the weather, and their plans for the afternoon; but finding her hopelessly irresponsive, Geraldine overheard him mutter: "Can't you answer, you young idiot?" this remonstrance being accompanied by a poke, whose only effect was to drive his sister into a deeper depth of stupefaction.

More crushed and dispirited than ever, it seemed to Geraldine as if those last six months of paternal and fraternal oppression had well nigh extinguished the last spark of hope and courage in the hapless sisters, and she began mentally to hatch plots for their future emancipation.

"If I can succeed in winning a little more freedom from their hard taskmasters for those poor slaves, I shall look upon myself as a second Wilberforce," she thought.

"If you should feel disposed, dear Miss Bartholomew," said Nina, at parting, in tolerably humble accents, for her vanquished rival's severity had subdued her not a little, "to attend our wedding—indeed, if you would be one of the bridesmaids—I am sure I should think it quite a kindness. It is true we have not known each other *very* long, but you have been such a true and dear friend to Herbert that I really feel towards you almost as a sister, and dear Mrs. Egerton is so kind about letting me invite any friend I please."

"*Thank* you, Miss Nutting, you have my sincerest wishes for your welfare, but I have long been of opinion that the office of bridesmaid should be confined to those with whom we are intimate; and apart from that objection, I should in any case be unable to afford the needful time."

The little party quitted the Rectory, and retraced their homeward way across the forest.

CHAPTER III.

Italy!

Time which hath wronged thee with ten thousand rents
Of thine imperial garment, shall deny,
And hath denied to every other sky,
Spirits which soar from ruin :—thy decay
Is still impregnate with divinity,
Which gilds it with revivifying ray.

BYRON.

THAT first afternoon was spent at the Wolf's Eye crags, and intensely did Geraldine enjoy wandering hither and thither on the lonely rocks, and watching the treacherous tide creep in across a salt waste of seaweed. The drive home in the still fall of the autumn evening was delightful. There was a vivifying keenness in the air which hinted of coming winter, and a glow from the setting sun lit up untold glories in the foliage, now changing its uniform sober green to every bright shade of yellow, brown, and red. The already fallen leaves gave forth a faint damp fragrance, and the lanes were alive with school-children, who, released from school, were scrambling up the banks in eager quest of nuts or blackberries.

In the village street the carriage stopped, that Mrs. Egerton might fulfil her promise of chaperoning Miss Nutting to the Curate's bow-windowed lodging over the baker's shop, and Geraldine suggested that the remainder of

the party should likewise dismount and walk home in the twilight. They strolled leisurely along, Geraldine in silence, that she might enjoy without distraction the solemn sweetness of the hour, and the Archdeacon frequently dropping behind that he might gaze uninterrupted upon the rich after-glow in the west, and delight himself with the repetition of his favourite stanzas from Keble's November poem.

"The earth is a beautiful place after all," said Lord Rotherhame, "despite the lamentations good people are so fond of putting into our lips over—'This world so full of toil and woe.'"

"Ah, yes! I can hardly bear to think the day will ever come for me to leave it, never to see any more the dear old round of seasons, fresh enchanting Spring; sleepy, splendid Summer; rich Autumn, with its waning brightness, wild winds, and solemn forebodings; and hoary, jovial, snowy Winter. It will be years, ages, before I can grow to love any new order of things, however beautiful, half so well."

"Do you love Nature so ardently, Diney? cold, cruel Nature, who smiles when hearts are breaking, and plays with human lives as she would with sticks and dust."

"I would not, if I could, drag Nature down to our mortal level, nor force our glad majestic Mother to take part in all our petty conflicting griefs and passions. I love to see

her smile when I am sad, because then I know that she is in harmony with the Mind of God, Who has ordained the goal of all things to be perfect good."

"You look through a distant telescope. Ah, Diney! the end is very, very far distant, and how many are falling by the way, and will never reach that perfect goal at all!"

Geraldine's heart sank at the deep despondency of his tone. She longed to say some word of religion, but her habitual reserve on the subject nearest her heart overcame her, and she continued silent.

"Do you ever think," he pursued presently, "as you tread lightly the surface of this flowery, smiling earth of the short time she allows poor human beings to enjoy her loveliness, and how, one by one, she takes them all in her relentless grip, and locks them up in her underground prison, away from air and light and life, and converts their fair, strong frames into mere gas and garbage for the feeding of her charms?"

"No, I never feel like that. I have an intense sense of affinity with both sky and earth—a kind of faith that heaven is my father and earth my mother, and that some day it will be both right and natural for each to claim their part in me,—for my soul to fly away and mingle with the free, pure elements, and my body to lie down in the quiet kind embrace of Mother Earth."

"And I, on the contrary, hate both alike

in my thinking moods, as inhuman, unloving, soulless monsters. You see, we are at daggers drawn on this point. I hope, for the sake of our future peace of mind, that it is not what the Rector would term 'a vital difference.'"

"We must travel together, must we not, Kenelm?" said Geraldine. "I shall find out then if you really do hate Nature, or whether you merely pretend to for the sake of being contradictory. Besides, I think it is our bounden duty to see all we can of this globe before the time comes for us to remove elsewhere."

"Then we must begin with Italy," he chimed in, eagerly; "Italy, Asia *in petto*, the second cradle of the human race! The Italian churches will better hit your fancy, I expect, than the mysterious relics of the priestly Gothic architecture, those shrouded sanctuaries of mediæval awe. Free as the sky, with their domed roofs and shining marble floors; open as day, without one dark arch or shadowed niche in which superstition may skulk; temples of art whose saints are gods, whose Virgin is a Venus, whose cherubs Cupids,—you will be inclined to forgive the churches of Catholic Italy for being one half Pagan, the other Christian."

"I can well believe that in Italy, if anywhere, the ancient gods have a right to be remembered, and I think I should, as you say, hardly regret that the forms and asso-

ciations of the old religion have lingered on and received fresh consecration from the new."

"Then you would have the further pleasure of travelling back something like a century in the world's history. Italy, with its marble palaces, its high, narrow streets, across which fern-grown arches reach like outstretched arms; its tortuous staircases, winding upwards beneath sculptured roofs and fading frescoes; its peasants living on bread and fruit, its population of statues, bears but little trace of the bustling, unoriginal nineteenth century. There you may even for a while forget the existence of go-ahead America, and self-important, purse-proud Britain! There, amid the most ancient and splendid associations that Europe can boast, you may trace her pedigree from magnificent and far-descended Asia. We will begin by driving along the Cornice route, among the olive-woods,—the olives, whose strange, fantastic, tortured trunks seem for ever doing penance for that woeful sight once seen by them in Gethsemane, which turned them grey with horror. You shall watch them at sunset, soft as shaded velvet in the sinking light—the blue Mediterranean sparkling, and the pink almonds smiling through their dusky foliage—and at noon of night, when the universal glitter is gone, you shall see the oranges making golden moonlight, and the fishermen's boats gliding through the

tideless sea with flaming torches at their prows. High rocks will tower above you, white sails glide over the impalpable horizon, stone-pines shed their black shade over the secret haunt of maiden-hair and red anemone. Every moment, rounding some headland, fresh glories, fair valleys, deep bays and gleaming villages, will burst upon your eyes. And when the rocks break, Diney, you will behold beyond the rise and fall of a sweep of pine-clad hills, the white phantom peaks of the snowy Alps, rising in the dim distance, cold and high, like the Mountains of Death behind the plains and valleys of sunny life."

"The mountains—the beautiful snow mountains!" exclaimed Geraldine, catching his ardour, "which God has crowned with His own whiteness, that all may see they dwell on high, above the defilement of the world, near to His own pure presence. Why is it, Kenelm, that high mountains have such a mysterious power to elevate one's soul? The only time I ever saw one,—it was Snowdon—a strange peace thrilled through me as my eyes fell upon its crest."

"For the reason you yourself suggest, I suppose, that they rise above the earth and seem to approach to Heaven."

"David owned their power when he called them 'the hills whence cometh my help.' The sublimest experiences of our race have had the hill-tops for their scene. On a mountain God spoke with Moses, on a mountain evil

was vanquished by good, Satan by Christ; on a mountain He gave the beatitudes, and was transfigured; from a mountain He ascended into heaven."

"Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord?" said Lord Rotherhame, dreamily. "He that hath not deceived his neighbour,"—that draws the line very sharp, Diney. But in any case the air of those celestial heights would, I doubt not, be too rarefied for the endurance of sinful mortals—the Apostles even, when they breathed it, fell on their faces to the ground."

They now paused outside a cottage almost hidden beneath a bower of ivy, and a little garden resplendent with tall hollyhocks, broad-faced sunflowers, and showy, cheerful dahlias.

Geraldine immediately recognised the abode of Mrs. Weedon. It occurred to her that this would be a good opportunity to pay her respects to the old nurse, a duty she had rather shrunk from under present circumstances. She felt instinctively that she had made an enemy of Mrs. Weedon on her first introduction by her interference to save little Dolly from the "stick," and that her admittance into the "Family" would be reckoned an intrusion by the Conservative dame. She whispered to Lord Rotherhame to come in with her. Mrs. Weedon received her with an obeisance of deep respect, but her air was more constrained than it had been the previous

Christmas. Geraldine's interest had been somewhat roused by the singular intimacy between Lord Rotherhame and his old nurse, and now that she had the chance of seeing them together she watched them curiously. One moment she would catch Mrs. Weedon's eyes fastened on her foster son with an expression of almost devouring tenderness ; the next, without apparent cause, she would see it change to one of discontent and displeasure. He, on the other hand, spoke to her with unvarying affection, and Geraldine began to reproach herself for her instinctive repugnance towards one who was evidently so dear to him.

"Ought I not loyally to adopt all his loves and all his interests?" she asked herself, and promptly acting on the thought, she exerted herself to talk in her friendliest manner to Mrs. Weedon, enumerated the few wedding-presents she had already received, and begged her to come to South Grantham for the marriage.

The old woman thanked her, curtseying, and was proceeding to excuse herself on the score of age, when Lord Rotherhame interrupted her with sudden sharpness.

"What in Heaven's name is that girl doing here still, Granny? Is it not more than a week since I told you she was to go?"

Mrs. Weedon started.

"May it please your Lordship, her aunt, Mrs. Bradshaw, wrote word that she wished to see Dolly for two or three days afore she

went to Edinburgh, and I made so bold as to keep her back a bit longer till I'd got her things tidy, and made her fit to be seen."

"It is a pity. The less time lost in her education the better."

Something in his tone made Geraldine look towards him. His cheek was flushed and his brow darkened by a frown. She felt instinctively that she would do well not to take open notice of this change of mood. Following the direction of his eye, she saw peeping out from behind the chintz curtains, the curly head of the little girl, whose champion she had been on her last visit to the cottage.

The child dropped a curtsy as she met the young lady's glance, and then smilingly kissed her fat little hand. Geraldine went towards her and bending, enfolded her in her arms.

"So you have not forgotten me, my wee darling?" she said.

"I *merember* you quite well, you lovely little lady," answered Dolly, showering the softest of kisses on her cheeks. "Be you going to be married to my Lord? Please tell *my* Lord that I don't want to go to Scotch-land, if *you* are coming to live up at the Castle."

"Geraldine, we must be going!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, imperiously, while Mrs. Weedon, glancing at his disturbed face bustled forward.

"Oh, lor' ma'am! don't ye be touching

her ! We keeps her clean, ma'am, but she's not fit to be handled by the likes of you. Dolly, Dolly ! mind your manners to the young lady, my dear."

"Why is she going off to Scotland ?" asked Geraldine, rising. "I should like to have had the sweet thing often to see me when I come to live here. She looks so soft and comfortable, so far nicer than the pampered noisy little torments that always pester one in drawing-rooms."

"She is going to a school in Edinburgh, where she will have exceptional advantages in the way of education," said Lord Rotherhame, positively. "For her grandmother's sake I wish to do well by her. But she must not stay here—a child in the house is too much for Granny ! Now, dear, *won't* you come ? The dressing-gong has sounded, and you know we shall be keeping your father and mother waiting."

They left the cottage, but in the garden Lord Rotherhame was detained a moment by Sally Tibbetts, who had hobbled to her door to watch for him, and who looked like one of those evil creatures, bats or beetles, which the darkness of night calls forth. Geraldine was passing on to await him in the lane, when suddenly a hand was laid upon her arm, and, turning, she found Mrs. Weedon's sharp chin almost resting on her shoulder.

"Look to yourself, Miss Egerton," she whispered, hoarsely ; "and if you dwell in

peace and safety, and have a good home, never leave it for them walls," and she pointed ominously towards the grey, solemn towers just seen through the deep shade of the trees. "Look to yourself, I say; for *he'll* never make a young life happy, and a curse is on them walls."

And before the young girl had time to answer, or ask her meaning, the old woman had released her arm, hurried back to the cottage, and shut the door behind her.

Geraldine was strangely excited, and emotions of romantic pleasure at the mystery of the warning contended in her mind with vague misgiving. But when Lord Rotherhame came to her side, and, taking her hand, led her gently through the weird gloom of the oak-trees, his touch once more thrilled her with a passionate joy, and she felt that, whether the old woman's words were true or false, a curse shared with him would be better than a blessing with all the world beside. The western glow had faded now from crimson to a vivid orange, and the sable shadow of coming night was descending on the grass. The young moon, sickle-shaped, as though in honour of the newly-gathered harvest, hung low on the eastern horizon; and the dew was falling thick and heavy. Lord Rotherhame spoke to her, as they went, soft words that flooded her soul with rapture. The hour had its witchery for him also, and his eyes began to sparkle.

That which, at the time when he first contemplated making her his wife, had seemed to him a sacrifice of almost unmixed pain, made only to lighten his burdened conscience of a fresh load—remorse for a cruel wrong done to a young and ardent heart—was now fast becoming a delight. Haunted by the ceaseless consciousness of wrong done to others, it was soothing to feel that to one fellow creature at least he could give happiness, a relief to think that his guilty life would be redeemed by the good deed of one soul made glad. Only at intervals a sudden recollection of the dead would strike a discordant note within, would shade his face with gloom, and make his tender tone turn hard.

"This day has been *perfect* happiness!" said Geraldine.

"Do not say that, dear child. Solon bade Cræsus call no man happy till he was dead. He meant that while life lasted there was no security, and that the gods have a malicious pleasure in discrowning those |whom they have raised above the common height."

"We are not pagans, however, nor are we governed by malicious caprice. All things are given us richly to enjoy, and I do not see why we should cloud our present happiness by anticipations of trouble that may never come."

"Ah, we look at life, each of us, from our own point of view, little Geraldine. You

stand on the threshold of the highway, and replete with excitement, novelty, and wonder, the world lies all before you. I have lived my life! Births, marriages, deaths, travellings, stayings at home, the pleasure of being virtuous, the excitement of being wicked, I know them all. And so to save you undue disappointment, I warn you that if your future has no violent shocks in store for you, it will at least carry, almost inevitably, dull disillusion in its wake. Cheer up, however! Before you reach that point you will have plenty of fresh experiences to encounter, both interesting and enjoyable, and will assuredly receive your full meed of love and admiration."

"Do not fear that your croakings will frighten me, Kenelm. I am aware that yours is one of those minds which find an artistic pleasure in melancholy. But no gloomy prognostications can shake my faith that my future holds, at all events, boundless possibilities of bliss."

Her confident smile, her unmoved trust, sent a sharp pang of self-reproach through his soul. He had not the heart to continue the warnings which conscience had urged him to utter on the changefulness of human things. Involuntarily he raised his eyes toward the ivied buttresses towering high among the trees, the spot where his criminal secret lay concealed—a snake in the grass of this young girl's smiling Eden—a torpedo,

which needed but a spark to ignite, and spread ruin and devastation all around. And then with fresh force came that temptation which of late had assailed him by night and by day, in the new and fatal form of duty to his future wife—a devil in the guise of an angel of light.

“The hour has come when I must at last resolve finally to tread down the peril that menaces her peace! A match and two minutes of time are all that I require to make my security impregnable. No eye would see!” No, none, save His, Who is the Father of the fatherless!

CHAPTER IV.

Show boldness and aspiring confidence,
 Seek the lion in his den,
And fright him there, and make him tremble there.

We must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

SHAKESPEARE.

THE autumn afternoon was drawing to its close, and clouds of yellowing leaves were being hurried to earth by the breath of the rising breeze. The landlady of the "Travellers' Rest," standing at her ricketty door, meditatively surveyed her lean chickens fighting over their scanty meal of grain; and the lonely inn, with its untidy thatched roof and bowing walls, looked lonelier and more uncanny than ever. Tilda Tagg herself had not been improved by years; there were stray grey hairs in her greasy ringlets, and sourer marks about her thin mouth, and she turned back to lay her tea-table with a less nimble step than of yore.

"Shrimps and pickled pork," she murmured to herself, as she opened her corner-cupboard; "be-opes they'll pay for't. They don't look up to no good, they two chaps! But there, it ain't nothin' to me, so long as they don't go bringin' the bobbies about the place." Then pushing open the door which

led into her little bar parlour, she added curtly: "Tea's ready; walk in, gents!"

Mrs Tagg's visitors, two in number, had been spending the afternoon in the privacy of her grimy little sanctum, and the good lady, who had followed them closely when they first entered it, and had taken the precaution of locking up her silver spoons, little suspected that the younger of her unknown guests was no less a person than the missing son and heir of the Lord of the Manor. It was difficult indeed to recognise Ralph's graceful head under the oily wig which covered it, and the blue spectacles which he wore imparted a rather ghastly appearance to his face, sharpened already by recent illness. Ever since the day of his accident he had lain disabled in Josceline's lodgings, and a tedious time of anguish, both bodily and mental, that month had been to him. The forced postponement of his design had given him time to go through a phase of terrible indecision between opposing duties; an agony out of whose chaos had at last risen immutably the clear conviction that, short of ruining his father, he was bound to do his uttermost for the protection of his little cousin's rights. He read in the papers the news of Lord Rotherhame's approaching marriage, and concluded rightly that such an event would be to him a fresh motive to destroy the criminating papers. Aided by Murray-Carr, his faithful ally, he resolved,

the moment he was strong enough, to take the long-delayed journey to Rotherhame and discover, if possible, that ancient entrance through the vaults, of which his father had spoken to him, and ransack the Castle dungeons for the knapsack of which six months ago, little dreaming of its contents, he had caught sight as it lay among the rubbish in the desecrated oratory. He knew it was a desperate chance. But such as it was, he dared not neglect it; and he determined, whatever the result, to go afterwards and hide himself far from his home, become a common sailor, an emigrant, anything by which he might gain an independent livelihood, and avoid handling money which had been stolen from the fatherless.

On one point he was clear, although the casuistry of a rather morbid conscience had, for a time, bewildered him; no word must be whispered which could endanger a hair of his father's head, or, during his lifetime, darken his fair name. He clung to the desperate hope that even after Lord Rotherhame's death he might be able to contrive some scheme by which he could resign the peerage and yet conceal his father's complicity in the fraud. At all events, till that day he would keep silence, and reserve in secrecy and safety the proofs by which alone he could hope in the end to make restitution to his deeply injured kinswoman.

Josceline had been lying for more than an

hour asleep on the chintz-covered settle. Ralph, unable to close his eyes, was seated at the ill-fitting window, looking out restlessly over the wild heath country, now in mourning for the dead bloom of summer. The hoarse cawing of the rooks could be heard as, wending homewards to their roost round the Castle Keep, they filled the air with their tumultuous unison of sound. A deep sadness filled his breast. True picture of his life! Everything that was lovely in nature was fading and dying, and like the dull, forgetful grave into which flowers and leaves were sinking, seemed the irrevocable separation from the father he had adored, and to whom his heart still clung with a persistent and passionate devotion. A wild longing seized him to spring out of the window, to clear with active feet the short mile which lay between him and his home, to force his way into the beloved presence, and, by an absolute surrender of every personal aim and duty, to buy back the coveted treasure of his father's love.

But as he was on the point of yielding to the temptation, his eye caught the crests of the three gaunt fir trees which, swaying their mournful arms on high, marked the spot where the fateful waters of Culpepper's Bowl stagnated in solitude. He thought of the unquiet, dripping form that in his vision had come to him within the Castle walls—walls which like the tent of Achan, hid the spoils of blood ;

and he knew that no worse fate could befall his father than to be left to consummate his crime, abandoned to that sure Nemesis which treads upon their heels who do irreparable wrong to fatherless children, the peculiar wards of God.

"I confess," said Josceline, his deep voice rousing Ralph from his reverie, as with a stupendous yawn he dropped his long legs upon the ground, "I feel more disposed to lie down upon a Christian bed than to go 'down among the dead men,' now that night is coming on. Mrs. Tagg's whining voice is enough to give any one the blues; and I don't feel the least curiosity to make the acquaintance of the long-buried Earls of Rotherhame. I'll tell you what it is, my boy. Conscience has been scientifically proved to be a mere nervous contraction of the diaphragm, and you ought to treat it as such, and take a pill when it troubles you, instead of dragging me out on a wild goose-chase like this."

"That'll do," interrupted Ralph, without a smile in his solemn black eyes. "One needs to be in extra jovial spirits to appreciate *your* wit."

"These revolting appendages make one feel like a hairdresser's block," continued Josceline, with unimpaired good humour, looking ruefully down upon the false moustache which he had temporarily laid aside. "Bird of ill-omen, avaunt ye!" And

he jerked his thumb towards the window where a small bat hovered, peering through the dim panes with a wise and curious face, and half-folding its dusky wings. "Come along, Ralph; we stand upon the crisis of our fate, and must neglect no means of fortifying our inner man. Let's make a good meal and turn our backs on this stale hole, which, as our friend Mrs. Tagg so beautifully expresses it, 'do smell uncommon wa-arm and toastified.'"

"I don't care to take anything, thanks. I have a brandy flask in my pocket and the picklock."

"Well, you're worse put to it than poor Sir John Franklin when he demolished his shoe, if you are reduced to eating your picklock."

"There's something rather touching about your futile efforts to keep up my spirits," and Ralph patted his friend's shoulder with a melancholy smile. "Perhaps I should not be such bad company if I did not feel so infernally like a spy and thief."

"Nothing of the kind ! A little too much of a Don Quixote, perhaps, that's all."

Twenty minutes later, their brief meal concluded and paid for, the adventurers, armed with the implements necessary for their attempt, reached the edge of the fir-wood, on the slope above the old church, and looked down upon the peaceful village of Rotherhame. The sun, a red and rayless

ball, had just dipped below the solemn heath-clad hills, and the sky was all aglow as though painted by the flames of a world on fire—a burning crimson which paled as it spread towards the zenith into a yellow flood of liquid light, and then deepened into the purple gloom of the far, far east. Just opposite that side of the planet, from which the greater luminary would dip into infinity, the moon was rising round and golden, and one by one the stars were being kindled by the great Lamplighter of the universe. The earth herself lay so quiet that the lightest sound startled the ear, and clear and loud came the accents of distant human voices, and the babble of the streamlet by the village street.

The square church tower stood up sturdy and sombre against a back-ground of red light; and the breeze, freshening into a gale, swept softly over long reaches of meadow-land and rustled in the tree tops. Ralph gazed earnestly around him on each well-known spot, on the grey Castle in which he had been born, on the hectic flush of the scarlet creeper which clothed the tower where his nurseries had been, on the cottages with their sloping thatch, from which the smoke curled in purple waves; on the churchyard, with its wavy grasses and tall white tombstones, and on the Rectory house, lying sleepily among beds of brilliant autumn

flowers. One spot was left in all that scene which he might call his own, and only one—the cross-crowned grave, near the chancel arch, in which his mother slept; and he knew that when his day's hard work was done, and he came sick and footsore to ask a refuge, she would not deny him a night's rest by her dear side—a long night's rest which should never more be broken till the dawn of the eternal day.

Suddenly the church bell tolled for evening prayer, filling the quiet valley with deep, melodious echoes, and seeming to sound in Ralph's heart the knell of all that had made life sweet. Anxious to enter the sacred building before the rest of the congregation, and while the sexton was engrossed with his bells in the tower, Josceline hastily unfastened the wicket gate against which they had been leaning; and they were in the act of emerging from the shelter of the firs, when the tread of horses' feet on the darkening Down above their heads made them pause, and Ralph, seizing Josceline by the arm, drew him cautiously back into the cover of the plantation.

The horses' steps grew louder, slackening from a canter into a trot as they approached the crazy gate which at the foot of the Down opened into the village street, and at last paused within a few feet of the plantation, as the riders drew rein to look around them.

Ralph had hidden himself in the nick of time, for they were Lord Rotherhame and Geraldine Egerton.

She was out of breath with her fast gallop across the turf, and her cheeks glowed with a healthful bloom. The beams of the rising moon fell on her eyes as she turned towards her companion, and Berkeley could see that they were kindling with light and love. They were theorising, as was their wont, and every word they uttered could be heard with ease.

"Nature is not the soulless machine some scientific people would have us believe," Geraldine was saying, in her eager, ringing voice. "God, the great Artist, has surely breathed into these wondrous works of His, His own bright, glorious soul. Face to face, though thinly veiled, we meet Him in creation."

"It is, no doubt, pleasant to imagine some kind of personal life in the great forms of nature," answered her companion, softly, and Ralph quivered on hearing the once familiar accents of kindness in a voice which to him had long been harsh and bitter. "It is hard to believe that the thunder clouds, as they rush headlong at each other's hearts, and 'flash their red artillery' across the heavens, have no consciousness of the splendid warfare they are waging. It was always a favourite fancy of mine, do you know," he went on, as she turned her horse that she might look at the fading glory of the west,

"that the wind in past ages, before the modern reign of Man began, was Lord and King of this globe through the weird, mad æons of chaos. Have you not heard it moan at times as if restlessly bewailing its ancient long-lost dominion, sighing a mournful lament over its vanished greatness? And then, as if in scorn, it spreads its vast wings and careers off into the universe, returning after a brief self-banishment with redoubled fury, wailing, shrieking, wringing airy hands, tearing and destroying what it may not possess, wreaking wild vengeance on usurping Man. But it will have its own again one day, Diney, when the flood of fire from heaven shall have swept human life from off the face of this doomed globe, and the earth shall have been once more abandoned to wind, to fire, to desolation, and to death!"

"The earth will last our time," was the rejoinder, growing fainter as the horses, descending the slope, passed through the meadow gate; "and we won't trouble ourselves about the fate of our remote posterity."

Ralph and Josceline emerged once more, and as they crossed over to the churchyard the figures of the riders could be still seen ascending the steep height towards the Castle. No time was to be lost, and as the pair entered the church they could hear upon the path the patter of clogs belonging to two old women, who having attained a good

repute for regular churchgoing, failed not to sustain it, in confident expectation of a substantial recognition of their superior merits at Christmas from both "My Lord," and "Pa'son." Luckily for our adventurers old Jimmy, the sexton, stood with his back turned to them pulling away desperately at his two beloved bells, and they had consequently no difficulty in slipping unobserved into the shelter of the tower. Neither did he turn his white head as the old door creaked on its hinges, thanks partly to his deafness, partly to the incessant clanging of his bells. Josceline pulled to the door behind him, and then, climbing the winding stairs till they were out of sight from below, they sat down on the dusty steps, and composed themselves to patient waiting till the final locking-up of the church for the night should leave them free to issue forth and make their desperate venture.

CHAPTER V.

To go
Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground,
To be nailed down into a narrow place.

SHELLEY.

THE familiar words of the church-prayers could scarcely reach them through the thick masonry of the tower, but the Gregorian chanting sounded strangely weird and plaintive, as, echoing down the nave, it reached the place of their concealment, came mounting upwards faint and high, and died above their heads.

Josceline was too full of the adventure before him to pay much heed to the sacred strains, but Ralph joined intently in the rite with the unseen worshippers below. A curiously vivid impression was upon him that this was the last service in the beloved old church in which he would ever bear a part, and it seemed to him as though, lifted above and walled up from the rest of the congregation, he was already half initiated into some other life than theirs.

When the last "Amen" had died away, there was a brief silence, succeeded by a clattering of feet as the little company dispersed. One of the number was heard to linger, exchanging a few original remarks with Jim Beaviss on the weather and "taties," and then the sexton

stumped along the aisle, closing windows and putting things to rights, with a wheezing cough which seemed to augur that ere long old Jimmy would exchange his small labours in the church for a long holiday with his fathers in the churchyard. It seemed a tedious time to the prisoners in the tower before the leisurely old man departed, but depart he did at last, slamming and double-locking the door behind him against profane intrusion. Josceline sprang up, brushing from his head a huge spider who had been diligently weaving her web in his locks, and who witnessed his abrupt departure with the sorrowful indignation with which she would have watched a monstrous prize-fly escape her toils. Ralph followed his companion slowly down the winding stair; they were alone in possession of the church.

The few lights had been, of course, extinguished, and night, gathering fast, hid the far end of the chancel in obscurity, and shrouded dimly the outlines of the pulpit, screen, monuments, and hatchments. The font looked like a white, veiled ghost, watching its bereaved kinsfolk put on mourning. One spot alone in all the building was illuminated. The moon, just risen over the neighbouring cottage roofs, looked in through a Norman window facing south, streamed in a long river of quivering light along the nave, and fell on a marble tablet on the opposite wall—a tablet which announced

to all curious sight-seers that beneath lay the family burial-place of the Harolds of Rotherhame. The two moved silently in the direction of this tablet.

The narrow transept in which they now stood was so crowded with monuments that it bore almost the appearance of a mortuary chapel. There were memorials to the dead, representing the vicissitudes of human thought through the course of many centuries. The painted wooden case which held King Ealred's dust; the cross-legged Crusader, with joined hands uttering eternal, stony prayers; the ruffed Elizabethan hero, side by side with his lady, and encompassed by a goodly offspring, invoking fossilised blessings on their parents' unconscious heads; shrouded urns; ample Georgian peers, reposing serenely in arm-chairs, a list of their own virtues at their feet, and above their heads the ghastly symbols of mortality; finally, one or two simple brass crosses, tokens of a revived taste, if not of a reawakened faith. Ralph knew them all by heart, had studied them scores of times from his comfortable pew, as a diversion of thought in the midst of a long afternoon discourse, but he regarded them with other eyes now that he contemplated plunging below, among the long buried subjects of their inscriptions.

"Let us, from respect to my ancestors, make our toilettes before we go down to leave our cards upon them," he said with

dreary joviality. And as he spoke he tore off his cumbrous red wig with disgust, and revealed a small head, about which, closely cropped during his late illness, fresh curls of darkest auburn were already clustering. The light of Josceline's lantern, falling on the upturned locks, lit up countless threads of gold, and formed a kind of natural aureola, while, released from the disfiguring spectacles, his great weird eyes flashed darkly above his delicate cheeks, like northern lights upon a field of snow.

"Josceline," he pursued, with a strange smile, "we have now undressed for the night, and I think our next act should be to say our prayers. To step down into the tomb unshriven would be too rash a venture for sinful mortals."

"If you think such a proceeding would bring us good luck, I have no objection to observing the old custom," returned his friend, secretly catching at the idea, "though formally to request a blessing on our enterprise, when, in all probability, our sole achievement will be to sit here twiddling our thumbs till morning, seems rather like counting one's chickens before they are hatched."

"No; I feel a deep conviction that something momentous is going to happen," returned Berkeley, positively. "We must ask the Divine protection."

They both knelt down in the shadow-haunted transept, and Ralph's heart beat

high with solemn hope. It no longer seemed to him that he was about to act an undutiful and traitorous part, but rather that he was offering a pure sacrifice, which might avail to save his father from a final crime, and his kindred from the heavy curse which hung over their unsuspecting heads.

The church clock struck the three-quarters. Ralph rose and led the way to a great altar-tomb, which bore on its flat surface the effigy of a knight in armour. Scrutinised by the lantern's beam, the four sides were seen to be covered with armorial bearings, terminating at each corner in a projecting cluster of leopards' heads. A Latin inscription, somewhat worn, announced that this was the tomb of Sir Hubert Harold, second Earl of Berkeley.

"Well, here we are!" said Josceline. "I say, Berkeley, if, after duly knocking and ringing, we should find his lordship 'not at home' to visitors, I vote we make no bones about smashing that window, and forthwith finding our way back to Madam Tagg's. The old church is dismally cold, and I own I feel more disposed for a smoke and a glass of ale just now, even if enjoyed with all the drunkards of the place, than for abstinence among puffy-faced cherubs, superstitious symbols, and dead men's bones."

Ralph, who was setting himself to an eager examination of the monument, ignored this pusillanimous suggestion.

"You see there are eight leopards' heads at each corner," he said, musingly. "We will each take sixteen, and see if we can make out anything. Courage, Josce! 'adventures are to the adventurous!'"

On hands and knees down they went, entering on their task with eager and almost hopeful curiosity, which gradually slackened as the stern stone refused to yield its secret to their investigating fingers. There still survived in Rotherhame Castle chests and closets of the period of the Civil Wars, which opened by springs elaborately contrived for the concealment of persecuted Royalists. With these Ralph had been familiar from his childhood; he had become expert in their various modes of action, and, recalling the fact that on the inner wall of the ebony wardrobe, through which he had found his way into the dungeons, there were clusters of leopards' heads exactly corresponding to these on the monument, he concluded that it would be probably among them that the spring he sought would be concealed. When the two corners at the head of the sepulchre had been subjected to a vigorous examination, they went together to its feet.

There seemed to be something mocking in the immovable rigidity of the sculptured face, whose sightless eyes were fixed upon them, and Ralph, glancing back uneasily, continued his investigations with a desponding heart.

On a sudden, as he pressed with all his force inside the hollow of one of the grim pussies' ears, it appeared to him that the slab at the foot of the effigy moved, though so very slightly that for the moment he doubted the evidence of his senses. But the next, bending eagerly over it, he could discern a gap, perhaps an inch wide, between the side and end slabs of the tomb. Hardly able to breathe, in the intensity of his suspense, he beckoned Josceline to come near, pointed silently to the fissure through which a musty odour, as of long imprisoned air, was exhaling damply, and then tried to place his fingers again in the position which had produced the effect. But once lost, the advantage was not easily recovered, and several minutes had elapsed before, pushing with an energy which nearly skinned his finger-tips, the panel once more moved, and then with an unwilling, grating sound, receded about two feet and a half from the corner-stone. Josceline himself turned almost faint with excitement, and Ralph, passing his hand over his brow, as though to assure himself he was not dreaming, sank on his knees and devoured the black depths with his eyes. He could see no steps, and it was plain that if he desired to push his researches further, he must make up his mind to a leap in the dark. It was a nerve-shaking thing to be the first to descend into the ghastly nether-world of the Dead, and, for aught he knew, the place of alight-

ing might be twenty 'or thirty feet below. But vacillation is fatal to courage, and Berkeley would give himself no time for fearful anticipation. He slipped his feet promptly through the aperture, stretched them as far down as he could, without encountering any opposing obstacle, hung an instant by his hands, and then, closing his eyes, let go and dropped. A moment later he was on firm ground, except for a slight shock to head and back, none the worse for his sudden descent, and, looking up, he dimly perceived the flare of the lantern which Josceline was holding some eight feet above his head.

"All right!" he cried, cheerily, "look sharp after me, Josceline; that panel may be arranged on the same principle as a certain chest at home, which closes of its own accord, and only opens from without."

"That sounds encouraging," returned Josceline; "but—yes—by Jove! it *is* closing already!" He had only time to give one regretful glance at the upper world he was leaving, and to slip down after his friend, before the panel reclosed with a sullen groan. The lantern was extinguished by his fall, and they found themselves in pitchy darkness! Josceline began to whistle "Down among the dead men," but even his effrontery was quelled by the close and oppressive gloom that hemmed them in, and the faint sound died away in the clammy atmosphere.

Here they were, for better or for worse, in

the vaults at last, utterly unknowing any means of egress, shut away from light, and air, and life, out of reach of the roof through which they had effected this illicit entrance into a world to which they had not yet obtained the corpse's grisly right of access !

"At the worst we could easily make our voices heard when the people come to church to-morrow," said Josceline, with forced cheerfulness ; "for once that unnecessary Daily Service may be turned to some account. Strike a match, and let us see where we have got to !"

The lantern, when rekindled, revealed a low, long chamber, panelled with black marble, whose shining surface added a kind of sneering gloss to the harsh significance of the labelled niches in the walls, most of which were filled with coffins. The lawful mode of approach to this chamber of the Dead was through a heavy iron door, double-locked, and surmounted by a hatchment bearing the Harold arms and coronet. Ralph remembered how, clinging to his father's hand, he had watched the bearers disappear with his grandmother's coffin within that formidable portal. Treading on tip-toe, as though half fearful of waking the sleepers whose ears had long grown disused to the rude sounds of human life, he advanced slowly. All ages met here ; he stood side by side with ancestors who near a thousand years ago had known the Rotherhame heaths

and hills as he knew them now, and who, from the place in which he had been born, had ridden forth, followed by knight and squire, to assist in the regal councils of their kinsman Alfred. Some of the coffins were mere leaden shells, with remnants of their outer coverings still visible in the shape of a fibrous wood-powder by their sides—these contained bodies of a later date of interment; others, a little older, were mouldering altogether away, and through yawning gaps, gave occasional glimpses of their ghastly occupants. Ralph's feelings were strangely mingled as he stood thus among his buried forefathers, the irrepressible instinct of kinship contending with the strong antipathy of fresh young life to the inanition and decay of Death. Here they lay, the brave, the fair, the strong, old men and little children, all ticketed with some grand title—a ghastly mockery in this place of levelling equality.

Side by side, Ralph and Josceline studied the labels. There slept a fighting abbot, here a cavalier knight; those six tiny coffins were inhabited by babies, who had left this scant legacy alone behind them of their life on earth, while yon deep niche contained the fast dwindling remains of Ralph's great-grandfather—a spot which had never been hallowed by human tears, for the eighth Lord Rotherhame had covered but with the thinnest varnish of good breeding, a cold, worldly, and selfish heart. Disengaging his

arm from Josceline's, Ralph stepped on before him. He was looking out, with dread curiosity, for the renowned glass coffin which his grandmother had chosen as her final bed, and in which she lay embalmed in a gorgeous burying costume, whose splendour had long inspired the eloquence of the Rotherhame villagers. The sparkle of glass caught his eye, and the familiar face, which had been his childhood's terror, was before him. So like, and yet so unlike his memory of it!—lofty, scornful—a face from which all trace of womanly softness had been burnt out by the fire of pride—retaining, even now, all its old icy sternness, yet spiritless and dead, a waxen mask, growing daily yellower and more inhuman! Was there blood upon her hands, that they were veiled so closely in lace and satin?

“If my mother were here,” thought Ralph, with an irrepressible shudder, “I would take her out; I would dig a grave in the dark wood, or in the wildest corner of the heath, rather than let her lie in such vile company.”

“My good fellow,” whispered Josceline, shocked for once, “don’t glare at your poor old grandmother like that. Your eyes are fiery enough to burn her into life again.”

Ralph’s black eyes were in truth fastened on the senseless corpse with a stern, fierce, unsoftened gaze.

“I would to God I could wring an answer

from her!" he said between his teeth. "This head it was, I believe from my soul, which conceived the deed that I have to atone; this cruel tongue which beguiled my father into being her accomplice; these hands whose money hired the murderer! Oh, wicked woman! must you lie there like a block, and say no word of confession or remorse?"

He grasped the coffin, and would have shaken it, had not Josceline dragged him off with an expostulation on his sacrilegious anger.

"You have no right to revile the dead, who cannot answer you," he said, "and if that woman's ghost were to return to avenge the insult we should be in a most horrible predicament."

"Is Saul also among the prophets?" returned Ralph ironically. "Josceline turned a believer in ghosts, who has always scornfully denounced faith in the supernatural, even in its most orthodox Church form! I congratulate you! The place has had another effect on me. Among these sickening sights I feel inclined to lose all belief in the survival of the soul."

"What we see here proves merely what we knew already, the death of the body," returned Josceline, on whom the solemn scene was plainly making an impression. "These bodies about us may after all merely be the husks cast aside by their former in-

habitants when they reached a higher state of being."

"Yes, yes! of course!" returned Ralph impatiently. "I merely utter the materialistic thoughts which naturally invade one here, where there is no fresh air to breathe, no pure sky to look into, nothing to lift one above dust and ashes. But postponing the discussion, Josceline, till some future evening when we are sipping sherry round the fire, let us do our best to get out of this infernal foetid hole. I pray I may never more re-enter it in life or death!"

"I'm afeared you'll have to come to it one of these days," returned Josceline mournfully, and pointing out two empty recesses, one of which bore on a temporary label Lord Rotherhame's name, the other Berkeley's own.

"Very thoughtful of my unknown friend to have provided so handsomely for my future comfort," said Ralph, with a slight sickening at the heart; "but with my right to the property I hope I shall lose also all claim to the dignities of this heathenish temple of sepulture. The stars shall shine on my grave, Josceline, and the wild winds blow across it!"

"No poetical rhapsodies at present, I beg. The sound of wind and stars madden one, as the thought of water would, if one were dying in a desert. Do you know, I feel it would be a relief if we could give up whispering, and

open our lungs by a good wholesome shout ! ”

“ I have counted the leopards’ heads as we came along, and find that they are not laid on so thick as on the tomb above. There are twelve in all—three in each corner,” said Ralph.

An investigation, quickened by the frantic eagerness of the captives to escape their prison, terminated satisfactorily. In less than five minutes a spring was discovered, the duplicate of that upon the tomb above, and as the stone grated harshly back, and the friends squeezed themselves through the narrow aperture, the muffled clang of the church clock was heard above, striking the hour of eight.

“ Where in the world have we got to now ? ” said Ralph.

“ Into a gallery for moles, to judge by the bump my head has received ; or have we lighted upon the corpse of the great serpent ? This place is exactly like the interior of a snake’s backbone.”


And, as he spoke, Josceline raised the lantern and cast its faint ray on the contracted walls of the sub-way they had entered.

They found that they were in a circular tube, so narrow that they could not traverse it abreast, and so low that they were forced to crawl along on hands and knees. It had been lined within with a coating of bricks,

but the course of years had here and there made gaps between them, through which the damp mould could be seen and smelt. Large earth-worms dragged their fat, cold bodies along the broken floor, and the foul, close odour seemed to show that the passage depended for ventilation on such air as might struggle through the loose earth overhead. The atmosphere made both sick and giddy, and a horrible panic of suffocation assailed them, but impelled forward by intense curiosity, and by a natural eagerness to leave the hideous death-chamber far behind them, they struggled bravely on. More than once, however, Ralph would have succumbed outright to the faintness which crept heavily over his brain and senses, had not a timely draught of brandy quickened once again the sluggish action of his heart.

"If one could but stand erect, or stretch oneself a moment," groaned Josceline, "one would go on with twice the energy. I wonder how far we may be below the surface."

"The surface! The very thought of it brings new life, though hemmed in in this poisonous pit it is hard to believe that over our heads the stars are shining, the rabbits careering, and the night-wind blowing on the dewy grass. I should like to know whether any human being is walking at this moment over our heads, and whether the muffled echo of our voices could reach his ears. By the



way, I trust the infernal regions will not turn out to be in the bowels of the earth. I really could not tolerate spending eternity in a hole like this. I would rather even be chained up on some island in a sea of fire, where one could get a breath of air now and then, although each gust should blow the flames in one's face."

"The atmosphere is getting worse, I declare," gasped Josceline. "My head is going round like a teetotum. Doesn't it remind you somehow of the peculiar odour in the vault? I only hope," he continued, in a tone tremulous with anxiety, "that we have not been going round in a circle all this while, back to the point from which we started. If so, it's all up with our business."

"And ourselves also," answered Ralph faintly. "I don't think I could face entering that vault again. This atmosphere brings the whole scene back to one, bathed in ghastly hues of green and yellow. More brandy; we must not lose consciousness!"

Josceline, who had turned very pale, seized the flask and drank greedily.

"My goodness!" he muttered, "this is vile! My stars! this is first class!"

And, with a sudden change to eager excitement, he held up the lantern, and pointed out to Ralph that their way was blocked by what would have seemed an impenetrable barrier of stone and lead, had not the familiar

features of their tried friend the Leopard grinned encouragement from the forbidding apparatus.

With a cry of joy he raised himself to the full height permitted by the low roof of the tube, and, as he forced down the spring with muscles made powerful by revived hope, the door slowly opened, a huge cluster of spiders, dead and living, whose dusty webs were thus rudely torn into ruins, fell heavily upon his dark locks, and a rush of chill, prison-like air filled once more the quivering lungs of the two half-poisoned captives, who drank in the life-restoring draught with feverish eagerness.

CHAPTER VI.

There was a silent chasm
Betwixt his upper jaw and under,
And yellow death lay on his face,
And a fixed smile, that was not human,
Told, as I understand the case,
That he was gone to the wrong place.

SHELLEY.

As soon as clear vision returned to his dim and smarting eyes, Ralph perceived that the place now open before them was familiar to him, and that they were indeed at last on the threshold of the Castle dungeons. Not the show dungeons familiar to Murray and his sightseers, but that secret crypt which still, as he hoped, held the precious all-important documents.

Frantic elation succeeded to the despondent exhaustion by which the two adventurers had been so nearly vanquished. But, though the air they now breathed was fresh, compared to the clogged and stifling atmosphere they had inhaled during the last hour, Ralph and Josceline soon found that it was infected even more strongly with the same horrible death-like odour that had pervaded the burial vault. And as, after stretching their bent and contracted limbs to the utmost limits of possibility, they walked on and approached the three small cells which Ralph

had discovered during the previous winter, the air became constantly more noisome. The door of old Peter's dismal abode stood ajar, and they entered. In appearance it was almost unchanged. Some remnants of fat, and stale cheese, were on the table, and over them stood two long lean rats, who trotted and shuffled away unwillingly as the human intruders entered. Darkness was so habitual to this spot that it appeared loth to yield to the power of light, and, even when the lantern beamed steadily in the middle of the room, the vapours of perpetual night seemed to cling to the dripping walls, and to lower about the ugly furniture. But most heavily did it brood over the grim hangings of the four-post bedstead, as though it had some interest in veiling them in its own obscurity. They were all drawn and pinned tightly together, but the old man was evidently within, in his favourite hiding-place, for the dark outline of his form could be distinguished bulging out against the curtains. His sleep was sound, so sound that the noise of footsteps and Josceline's loud summons failed to rouse him. Even the rats had fled away, and all was still, and heavier and more heavy grew the clinging darkness and the noxious, all-pervading smell.

Uttering an impatient exclamation, Josceline pulled out the tightly tucked-in curtains. They gave way, and old Peter, his support gone, lurched suddenly out, and fell, cold,

weighty, and inert, against Berkeley on the floor.


Berkeley sprang back with a cry of horror. At his feet lay a creature which, despite its human shape, seemed more like some enormous insect or hairy animal, than one made in the Divine image, for the limbs, straightened by no careful hands, had been frozen by death into convulsive and ghastly contortions. The sunken eye-balls stared idiotically from their shrunken casements, and the toothless mouth was fixed open with a rigid grin. The long, lean fingers were so tightly clasped that the nails pierced the horny palms, and the legs were drawn up as though in the death-grapple the wretched old man had endeavoured to spring aside, and avoid the fatal dart of the unerring King of Terrors. On the bed lay the thin cat, dead also, for her master, in his impotent fear and envy, had determined that she should not survive him, and had wrung her neck as a parting salutation.

Sick and gasping, Berkeley tore a blanket from the bed and flung it over the hideous remains; then turning away in a horror which he could not master, he dragged Josceline from the foot of the bed, at which he was standing in fascinated silence. Closing the door softly behind them, they stole like criminals across the passage, and crept into the Oratory where Ralph had last seen the treasure of which he was in quest. And

while they searched, taking down one after another the boxes—one full, a second empty, a third of rotting wood, a fourth locked and strongly bound with iron—they talked of the miserable man who in these vaults had lurked for years, hiding himself from Death—but whom Death, more cunning and more vigilant than all the detectives and all the officers of justice that ever were, had found out at last, and strangled triumphantly, in spite of groans and prayers and struggles. Like a vulture, it had traced him by the scent of blood upon his hands, had fastened its life-destroying talons in his entrails, and dragged him down to a yet deeper hiding-place, where his fellow-men should never find him more. And from the dead wretch himself they passed on to speak of the effect his end would have upon themselves, wondered whether his fate would at last be dragged to light with the other secrets of the dungeons, and whether the law would hold Ralph's father responsible for the life it claimed for itself alone the right to take.

Partly, perhaps, from the reaction after the excessive exertion they had gone through, Ralph and Josceline at first prosecuted their search in a somewhat *dilettante* fashion, feeling almost satisfied with the success they had achieved, and it was only when they had ransacked the Oratory and its contents without finding what they sought, that anxiety again took possession of their minds.

Their position was in no case enviable, but to have to retrace their footsteps, breathe again the filthy air which had poisoned them on their passage through the subway, enter once more the grisly charnel-house, and encounter the new difficulty of climbing to the ceiling of the vault, which at present seemed only feasible by piling up coffins and mounting on them; to do all this with no consciousness of success to sustain them, was more than they could bring themselves to face! To attempt the only other mode of egress—the door at the head of the steps which opened into the Wardrobe Room, involved, if successful, the still more terrible alternative of a possible encounter with Lord Rotherhame. It was a choice of evils—evils which could only be faced if they were sustained by the consciousness that the end was secured for which so much had been dared and suffered. So a more vigorous search was set on foot, and Josceline was on his knees, applying his picklock to the solitary chest that remained unopened, when suddenly a grasp on the shoulder startled him, and looking back, he saw Ralph with uplifted finger, warning him to silence. In the profound stillness, his strained ear caught the sound of something like a stealthy footstep, and Josceline, now completely abandoning his nineteenth century enlightenment of belief, had already begun to prepare himself to encounter the murderer's unquiet ghost.



when from the opposite direction to the room in which the ghastly corpse was lying, a black shadow fell sharply upon the wall. Like a lightning-stroke the thought, "Lord Rotherhame!" flashed into Josceline's brain, and almost instantaneously he sprang up and concealed himself with Ralph beneath the mouldy hangings of the altar. It was the action of a moment—another, and it would have been too late. Had their movement been a shade less unanimous, prompt, or nimble, discovery must have been inevitable. Even as it was, Ralph was in the act of arranging the disordered folds when the intruder entered, and his movement must have been seen but for the unsteady flicker of the guttering candle, near extinction from its passage through the damp dungeon air. Josceline had fortunately kept his picklock tight within his grasp, and Ralph had retained sufficient presence of mind not to relinquish his lantern, which he now extinguished gently. Through a crevice in the tattered velvet he could plainly see his father, dressed in evening clothes. That he detected something exceptional in the wonted unvarying sameness of this most unchanging spot, was evident, for shading his light with his hand, he looked anxiously around, noting with palpable perplexity the disarranged position of the chests. He made a sudden movement, as though he would have passed on towards the death-room, perhaps un-

conscious, as his unseen watchers had been, that his captive had escaped him; but apparently changing his mind, he turned his back upon Ralph, unlocked a tiny cupboard in the wall, and after a few moments' fumbling, drew from it a packet of loose papers, bound together with white ribbon. Then, oh, heavens!—did instinct, that mysterious, unerring guardian, warn him that he was watched?—he seemed to look stealthily round, and remained for some minutes motionless in an attitude of listening. Each one of these minutes appeared an eternity to the concealed prisoners, as they held their breath even, lest its light motion should betray them. At last he moved, and once more they breathed freely, as to their unspeakable relief he turned his steps slowly towards the little door by which they had entered the Oratory. How pale, how sharp, how worn with sadness, appeared that proud face, when viewed thus without the mask it wore before the eyes of men! The altered aspect of those familiar features wrung Ralph's soul, and thrilled Josceline with a strange novel sense of awe and pity. For the first time he saw with his own eyes how Remorse can scar and shrivel the fair workmanship of God. But he was allowed no time to moralise. Whispering to him not to move, Ralph glided like a ghost from his hiding-place; and, rekindling his lantern, stole up to the cupboard which his father had

opened. One eager glance revealed what its contents had been, and with excited, shining eyes, he held up to view an empty leathern bag, bearing on its front the assumed name and address of the murdered Earl of Rotherhame. Josceline was at his side in a moment, fingering and devouring with his eyes the blood-stained leather.

"But it's empty," he whispered, hoarsely.

"Did not you see?"—Ralph answered, beneath his breath, his eyes burning with excitement. "He has emptied it and taken the papers with him—no doubt to destroy them. Josceline, we must lose no time. He is now discovering the body, that will detain him a few minutes. One of us must go up, and at least make an attempt to get through, and hide in his room. In all probability he will bring the papers there to burn them. Some chance of preventing him may occur. The other of us must stay behind to get hold of them, in case he leaves them below.

"I will stay," returned Josceline decisively. "If the worst comes to the worst, I stand the best chance of getting back through the vault; you would faint if you attempted it. Besides, you know the ins and outs of the Castle better than I do, so lose no more time!"

"If I can't get out, I shall come back to you. God grant we may not have come here simply to witness the destruction of our hopes!"

So saying, Ralph stole away, leaving Josceline to the society of his fears, a leering corpse, and a man he dared not face.

Ralph ascended the steep stairs with a fleet, noiseless step, and at the risk—for he was in total darkness—of many a slip on the worn, uneven stairs. At last he ran his head with violence against the wall, and stopping short, half stunned for the moment, found that he was on the threshold of the Wardrobe Room. Feeling the rough barrier over with his hands, he lighted joyfully on the now familiar Leopards' heads. But to his consternation he discovered that the spring which had never yet failed him seemed to be out of order. It yielded to his pressure, but no opening in the stone came to cheer him. A little further investigation, however, revealed to his touch a large, clumsy bolt, apparently placed there for additional security against intrusion from without. This he moved without difficulty, the small panel was pushed back, a warm gleam of fire-light stole in by the aperture, and the next moment he had crawled through and stood erect within the Wardrobe Room. There was no fire in the grate; the light he had seen came through the open door of his father's bedroom. Thither, therefore, after closing the opening, he cautiously repaired. The high wax candles on the table were unlighted, and the fire threw a red glow and fitful shadows over the chamber. In the

uncertain light a strange life seemed to take possession of the figures on the tapestry, and even the cumbrous carved furniture wore a kind of self-conscious aspect. The coverings of the great oak bedstead were partly opened, the crimson silk curtains drawn back, as though to invite to luxurious repose, and at the foot of the bed, in his little crib, could be seen the golden head of Edward, his cherry lips parted, and his round cheek pressing his pillow in innocent slumber. Ralph lingered fondly by the small sleeper, with an irresistible longing to press once to his lips the pink, dimpled hand that lay upon the quilt, but his ear, now trained to vigilance, caught the first faint creak which heralded his father's return. He retreated to the window and hid himself behind the curtains. Near half an hour elapsed, however, before Lord Rotherhame entered his room. He was undressing, and the moments dragged themselves tediously away, while Ralph stood sick with fear, lest each in turn should seal the fate of the documents on which so much depended. So much—for who shall measure the illimitable value of honour, right, and justice! It was with a deep, solemn thankfulness, a strange awe, as he began to see that the Hand of God was indeed with him in his desperate undertaking, that he beheld, when Lord Rotherhame at last appeared, the precious packet safe and intact within his hand. All was not yet lost!

He ventured for one moment to part the curtains from the wall, and take one glance at his father's face. It was pallid, grave, and awe-struck, as though he had received a sudden shock; and yet care seemed to burden his brow less heavily than when Ralph had seen him in the dungeons. Perchance the knowledge that the lips which might have betrayed him were sealed to eternal silence had brought him relief. Ralph shuddered to think how little reliance could be placed on such security as that—for the body of him whose death is secret, unsanctioned by priest, registrar, or witness, being dead yet speaketh—speaketh grisly words—words potent to blanch the living cheek of him on whom suspicion rests, and to quench the light of his eye for ever.

When Ralph next risked a peep, his father was sitting up in bed, propped high upon his pillows, reading with painful eagerness the accursed papers. He could see his face change from moment to moment, the quick colour coming and going, and the large melancholy eyes one moment lighted up with interest, the next suffused with an unwonted dewy haze. It was the first time he had ever beheld those orbs tear-dimmed, and with a reverential instinct he withdrew his gaze and closed the curtains, feeling as though he had done a treacherous deed. An hour passed—two hours—and the interval be-

tween each quarter as it rang from the great clock on the Watch Tower seemed interminable.

The air of the room was sweet and fragrant; a warm, hushed stillness pervaded all things, disturbed only by an occasional restless movement from the bed or the comfortable murmur of the fire as it blazed up the wide chimney. At last—is it possible that he has been weak enough to yield to the drowsy influence of the hour?—Ralph rouses himself with a start. The cry of a screech-owl whirring past the casement sounds mournfully in his ear; a gust of wind sweeps by, beating the loose ivy against the panes, and the clock strikes two! For the third time he looks out. The fire has sunk low, and burns red and hot upon the hearth; the candle is out, and the deep, regular breathing in the room seems to show that Lord Rotherhame is at last asleep. Ralph stretches his head out further, and, straining his eyes through the obscurity, discerns the papers lying together in a heap on the pillow by his father's cheek. Could he have dropped off unawares? Would he consciously have run the risk of some one entering and handling them while he slept? His eyes are fast closed. Ralph, knowing how light a sleeper he is, and that now has come the moment to make his final venture, steals out, slips off his boots, and

crawls across the room. His reflection in the tall mirror startles him; it is like a wild animal crouching!

His heart beats so loud as he reaches the bed that he fears its thump will arouse the sleeper. But no! God Himself has sealed those eyes, and the unconscious man lies wrapped in deep oblivion. Instant and stealthy as a cat, Ralph grasps his booty! It is in his hand! He hides it within his waistcoat, but his father neither moves nor speaks. Back now to the door he creeps, dragging his body like a snake along the floor. He has crossed the room, has reached the door, and now, half raising himself, is seizing the handle with firm and gentle grasp.

"Father, father, get into my bed! There is a gose running about the room—I have been watching it a long time, it wanted to bite too!" cries a plaintive, childish voice.

Ralph, with big drops upon his brow and starting eyes, turns his head, and beholds little Edward sitting up, grasping his crib with both hands, and gazing, his cheeks scarlet, and his bright hair dishevelled, on his brother's crouching form.

That is the last object that leaves a distinct impress on his mind. Then all is bewilderment. He has opened the door, and is in the picture gallery, across which, white and weird, the pale moonlight is streaming. There is a spring, a cry, a rush, his ears are filled

with a hubbub of confused noises, his feet hardly touch the ground; he is flying for something more than life. Down the stairs, along the passages, down again, doubling here and there, crossing suites of empty rooms, and behind—nearing and nearing, the pursuer's feet! He sees before him an unshuttered casement—the window of the steward's room, some fifteen feet above the ground. The heavy door slams behind him, he flings an oaken chest against it with almost supernatural strength—he has gained a minute, and while they are battering at the door behind him, he throws up the sash and looks out. The stars are shining down on the flat, hard paving-stones, the height is sheer, it is an ugly prospect. Ralph stands upon the windowsill, looks down, hesitates and turns his head. The chest is being pushed back, and the door yielding to the pressure from without. Quickly he lets himself down, clinging to the windowsill, clutching the ivy which here creeps along the wall. Then he drops. There is a crash, and suddenly the stone pavement seems to heave beneath him, the sky to turn upside down, the solid Castle walls to lurch forward as if to crush him. But urgent necessity will not suffer him to lie stunned. He springs to his feet, sees a figure leaning far out of the window above, hears a cry whose meaning he does not understand, rushes forward across the moat, and is out of the Castle precincts.

A howling of dogs falls on his ear—in a moment he is surrounded by a yelping, growling throng. One, more savage than the rest, fastens its long fangs in his arm, but the well-known voice of the young master stills them all at once—Norna lets loose her prey, and he is free. Onward he rushes—trees, roads, fields, cottages, seem to fly from him as he goes—now through the river, now across the meadows, now over hedges and ditches, until at last he enters, like a hunted deer, a deep thicket of whispering trees. There, in the depth of the sweet, cool glade, drenched with dews and beheld only by the solitary eye of the moon walking in brightness, he sinks exhausted, powerless to go further. With trembling fingers he takes out the rescued documents, and by the faint light quivering through the branches begins to read. But what words are these that meet his gaze? Sentences not of law or pedigree, but of love—sweet, tender, passionate, deep. Good God! he throws them down, and with swimming head and bursting heart sinks crushed among the tall, wet bracken—he has stolen his mother's love-letters!

CHAPTER VII.

Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
These leaves that redden to the fall,
And in my heart, if calm at all,
If any calm, a calm despair.

TENNYSON.

SOUND asleep in the opposite extremity of the building to the tower in which Lord Rotherhame had fixed his solitary abode, Geraldine lay all through that eventful night, peacefully unconscious of the exciting scenes enacting close to her. Nor did she dream in the morning as she traversed the staircases and galleries which led to the breakfast-room, that one of the closed doors she passed concealed a prisoner. Josceline Carr never in all his after life forgot the moment when his former host came upon him, wandering like an unquiet spirit up and down the dreary length of the hidden dungeons. His nerves had well nigh given way beneath the strain, and unable through superstitious panic and feverish impatience to remain quietly where Ralph had left him, he had passed three solitary hours of horror in pacing slowly the narrow area of his prison. Not daring to look behind him lest the ugly features of the lately dead should grin over his shoulder, and afraid to pass the closed door of the death-chamber, it had been for the moment almost

a relief to exchange the supernatural terror which oppressed him, for a more earthly object of dread.

Lord Rotherhame, returning to the dungeons after his unsuccessful attempt to stop Ralph's flight, had come full on Josceline, whose wan cheeks and dilated eyes might well have moved a heart of stone. The interview was brief and stern—three questions by Lord Rotherhame, in a tone of distant thunder, answered by Josceline in a dispirited mutter, and he had been ordered upstairs, and consigned unresisting, without food, bed, or firing, to the chill custody of a disused room in Little John's Tower, there to wait till his captor's white heat of anger should have so far cooled, as to allow him to make the necessary examination without danger of losing his self-control. Thanks to the isolated position of Lord Rotherhame's rooms, the night's fracas had not disturbed the household, and as little Edward, who lived in an atmosphere of fairies, genii, and other fearful and wonderful beings, took the visit of the ghost he supposed himself to have seen, as a most natural and every-day occurrence, his father kept his nocturnal adventures to himself, owned merely to a sleepless night when catechised sympathetically on his exhausted looks at the breakfast-table, and hid beneath a smiling face a heart which swelled inwardly almost to bursting with dismay and vindictive baffled anger.

Breakfast was over, and the Archdeacon wandered out into the garden, down a long grass walk, edged by gnarled apple-espaliers, hollyhocks, red gladiolus, and tall white lilies, and here and there spanned by trellised arches of late roses, to an ivied arbour at the further end. It was a quaint bit of garden, full of sweet old-fashioned flowers, hedged by sweet-peas, by box and yew trees trimmed into strange fantastic shapes. An old wall, crumbling and mossy, ran round two of its sides, and below—for the garden was on a level with the Keep—at a perpendicular descent of twenty feet, lay the large grassy bowling-green, with its guard of half-ruined leaning towers, and its Great Approach—a broad turf drive, sweeping steeply down to the massive postern gate at the hill's foot.

Many a long afternoon had the Egertons whiled away in this garden with their host, preferring to take leisurely farewell of the dying summertide to hurrying through its dwindling golden hours in bustle, expeditions, and excitement. There they had observed, dreamed, enjoyed, watched the long shadows creep up from the west, and the Virginian creeper turn scarlet on the roof. Right before the arbour where they had been wont to sit together rose the grey Castle, its projecting buttresses hidden in shining ivy; and clinging to its walls a century-old pear tree, about whose stern stem, wisteria in an earlier season had hung its sweet pale blossoms, and

where honey-suckle now twined its cheerful wreaths. The gold of the setting sun, on those sweet September afternoons, had been reflected back by fifty honest sunflowers, the crimson sorrow of Love-lies-bleeding had made rich repose upon the beds, the luxurious stillness of the air, given up to sunshine and to fragrance, had been disturbed alone by the hum of insects, till at fall of day the elm trees became alive with the cawing of home-come rooks. There were marigolds, homely and cheerful, like healthy cottage children; red-hot-pokers whose molten tips glowed fiercely from behind borders of snail-tracked lavender; snapdragons menacing bee and butterfly with open, harmless, honeyed throats. Ideas and images of the past seemed to haunt the air of that old garden, fondly as the swallows, which for generations had made their nests beneath the Castle eaves, and which now as they flew round and round its towers lingered continually on balanced wings, as if for loving contemplation of their forefathers' fair home.

But to-day the Archdeacon did not confine himself to his favourite resort. He passed behind the arbour, and descended a flight of grass steps towards the shade of the encroaching forest. It was a fresh warm October morning, with a dappled sky, a shimmer of thick dew upon the grass, deep shadows and broad gold lights, and in the glades hard by the stags could be heard strik-

ing their antlered foreheads against the spreading boughs of the oak trees. A shout from behind him made him pause, and turning, he beheld Dr. Bogle in full pursuit.

"My dear friend, what a dream you are in! I have called you at least three times. Considering your sermon for next Sunday, I hope? My people are all looking forward to hearing you again, and I trust you'll not lose the opportunity to tell them a little home truth. The Puritanism and narrow-mindedness one meets with in these out-of-the-way country places is really quite disgusting."

"My experience is that it is best not to call attention to our little differences," returned the Archdeacon shaking hands, "but to go on one's own way comfortably as if one expected everybody to agree with one. What a splendid morning! Our kind host is to take us an expedition to-day into the heart of the mountains—as I believe one is bound in courtesy to call these grand heath-clad hills of yours. He was rather wanting at breakfast to get us to go without him and devote himself to business, but my wife and Geraldine persuaded him to take another holiday, and indeed our pleasure would have been greatly lessened if we had missed his escort. He is a charming companion."

"He is indeed, dear fellow, though a little given to moods and fits and starts. By the way, Egerton, since you are going out on this picnic, I wish you would find an opportunity

to acquaint our friend with a little domestic occurrence of which we are all very full just now, but which I have rather shrunk from mentioning to him for fear of awakening unpleasant recollections."

"Ah!" returned the Archdeacon abstractedly, as he leaned over the rustic wicket which opened into the forest, and gazed into its green and golden depths.

"Yes, what d'ye think? my silly lad, Robert, who, at his tender age should be thinking only of how best to butter his bread, has been and gone and got engaged."

The Doctor here paused for comment, and the Archdeacon, suppressing his impulse to commiserate the unfortunate object of Robert's choice, replied—

"No! you don't say so!"

"I do indeed, and though Car Bradshaw is no heiress, she will have, sooner or later, her three thousand and odd, and the young couple will in a year or two have such a moderate competency as will, I hope, enable them to marry without positive imprudence. But I'll tell you why I've not mentioned it to Rotherhame as yet," he added confidentially. "Bobby, with a strange similarity of taste to his late young friend, has been desperately smitten by the self-same damsel that poor Berkeley lost his heart to—Caroline, stepdaughter of his tutor, old Christopher Bradshaw."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the Arch-

deacon, waking from his abstraction. "Then one may hope that there will be now an end to the unfortunate difference that has estranged him from his father."

"Bless you! not a bit of it! That was settled long ago; their quarrel went a deal deeper. Berkeley's was a most painful case, in many ways, and he was terribly in fault; but on the other hand it must be owned that the Earl gives way more than he ought to proud revengeful feelings, and is not as much under the influence of right principle as I, his spiritual pastor, could desire. Indeed, to speak with the plainness of an old friend, Egerton, deeply as I am attached to him, I should have thought twice before entrusting him with a child of my own. 'Tisn't even as if your daughter were to be his first—but that man was distractedly in love with his late wife and"

"I do not at all share your feelings," interrupted the Archdeacon, colouring with annoyance. "Lord Rotherhame has his faults I am well aware, and I am also aware that there is much in his past life which needs to be repented of, and which I believe he does repent. But I feel now that I have got to know him under his own roof, that there is nothing to prevent my giving up my child to him, in the full confidence that she will meet with tender and devoted care."

"To be sure, to be sure! I quite feel that. His treatment of females is beautiful,

and your dear daughter, with her pretty little arch ways, is quite one to steal into a man's heart. But you mustn't be offended at what I say; remember I have known the Earl intimately for years, long before you ever set eyes on him. I can't sell my own conscience, and say that he has never given me cause for uneasiness, though at the same time I have often said, and will say before anybody, that Rotherhame is a fine fellow and a thorough gentleman, if ever there was one!"

The Archdeacon turned and retraced his steps in somewhat sombre silence, trying as he went to lull the feeling of anxiety which, of late entirely laid to rest, now began to stir again uncomfortably within him. The Doctor, noting his clouded brow, hastened to revert to his original theme.

"Last month Bob went to stay with his uncle and aunt Standish to enjoy a bit of gaiety. They were not at their estate at the time, but at Bath, drinking the waters, and must needs have Bob there too, to keep them company. They're uncommonly fond of him, treat him just as if he were their own, and as they've neither chick nor child, I think they have it in their heads to make a son and heir of him. Ha! ha! ha! Well, Robert goes to Bath, and you know how soon an eligible bachelor, especially when he's not bad-looking and has prospects, is spotted by the ladies. He gets asked to kettle-drums,

balls, and picnics every day, and ends by falling in love with the belle of the season, who is spending a month there with friends. 'Twas her name that first attracted Bob's attention; he was curious to see the girl who had made such a split between the Earl and Berkeley, and he tells me it was all over with him at first sight. However, nothing definite was settled till a fortnight since, when at the father's invitation he went down to spend a day or two with her family."

"I can only hope it will all end as happily as it seems to have begun," said the Archdeacon. "Have you made acquaintance with your future daughter-in-law?"

"Well, yes; I meant to have put off making the engagement public for a few weeks; but Thursday we received a telegram to say that Bradshaw had been summoned to the death-bed of a relative in the country, and that the young lady would take advantage of his escort to come so far and be introduced to us all by Bobby in person. She came yesterday, and so I thought the Earl had better know the whole story at once, as he might fall in with her any minute and wonder how she got here. She's a sweet pretty creature, and I hope in time will be on comfortable terms at the Castle, for I should be vexed indeed if anything occurred to make a coolness between families which have been intimate so long as us and the Harolds."

The Archdeacon promised to do all he

could to break the news delicately to Lord Rotherhame, and after a short conversation on the interesting pair and their prospects, broached the fruitful topic of Church Rates, in which the two clergymen speedily became engrossed.

A long day out of doors lying among the bracken, inhaling the pure healthful air that blows across the moor—the changing, shifting sky above, and around a billowy sea of dark green heather—what happiness it is! Nature has prepared the scene for her children's refection; it is she that has laid the ferny bed, laden the hedges with blackberry and honeysuckle, reared the tall firs in whose tops the breeze is whispering, and provided the rural concert which, from solemn rook and twittering blackbird, fills the autumn air with melancholy sweetness. O, the free life of those wild regions on which the destroying hand of man has not yet fallen! the silent swoop of the solitary heron, the mysterious life of ant, spider, and heather-bee, nourished on sweet herbs and lonely grass, the sigh of the rushes as they bend above the sleeping pool! For the oppressed soul, our Mother Nature has here, in her own heart-home, words and kisses of mournful peace, and for the young and happy, touches that thrill the quick blood with rapture, and stir the heart with vague mysterious yearning. To Geraldine this long day's wandering was passionately sweet, for by her side, seeing what she

saw, hearing what she heard, was the man she worshipped. He had scarcely left her all day long, and if at intervals she rambled off for a moment's lonely thought his eyes had followed her with wistful gaze. Something about this bright girl, with her whole soul awaking within her to the wonder and beauty of life, fascinated him strangely—he kept near her, as on a cold, raw day, one lingers by the fire, and seemed to find in her nature a refuge from his own. While actually in her presence he lived a double life, was happy in her happiness. The intensity of that happiness he scarcely realised. To be watched over, cared for, loved, how sweet that is! for the solitary stream to flow calmly into the untrodden ocean of wedded love, what transcendent blessedness! Her heart was so full that it seemed to burst its limits, and to overflow to all the world around. It is God's grand test of hearts, to bid the sun of joy shine on them—the sun beneath whose rays some natures contract to a more shrivelled and narrow egotism, but beneath whose holy influence others open like flowers in May, to shed perfume and brightness on all surrounding things. Thus, even in this world, the sheep and goats of humanity separate themselves either from other into two great ranks; and the one, self-doomed, might wander on into eternal silence, forgotten and unblest, were it not for the yearning kindness of that Great Shepherd Who

seeketh the lost, even though they stray afar, among the dark, weird hills of Death.

The long still hours wore away at last, and the sun was setting in a celestial ocean of fire and gold, when the carriage re-entered the forest on its homeward road. Here Geraldine dismounted from the box, and according to custom set off to walk the last part of the way with Lord Rotherhame. The woods seemed one indistinguishable maze of green and gold ; lights and shadows crossing, interlacing, ascending, and descending, in a bewildering harmony. The birds were going to roost, their low twitter sounding softly in the silence of the October evening ; the low sun sent his beams aslant through the branches, and, as if wearied, they lay long on the mossy ground. Gradually a gentle gloom settled down upon the tree-tops, and in the falling twilight a dim mystery began to hang about the forest-glades, as though they held veiled some sacred presence. Here and there in the obscure distance a track of gold was seen across their cloistral depths, as though angels' footsteps had traversed them and left a bright imprint behind. The path was carpeted with glowing beech-leaves, from which arose a rotting scent, and among which sprang up clusters of fantastic fungi of elfin colour and design. A red-gold gleam rested on the dark trunks of oak and beech—a gleam of unearthly glory, awful as the smile of God, satisfying because divine.

The pair sat down side by side, and looked about them thoughtfully.

"Tell me your idea of the most perfect happiness," said Geraldine, as she threw herself full length on a bed of yellowing ferns.

"Your companionship—need you ask?" he replied with mock politeness.

"I prefer truth to hackneyed compliments, my Lord!"

"Well then, courtesey apart, if you must have it so—my present idea of happiness is sleep—a deep sleep, and a long sleep."

"You might as well say Death at once," she answered sadly.

"I would, were I quite sure that death and sleep were one. But stay, I know a more lively alternative. I would choose to be a swift, delivered from soul, conscience, and Deity, free, foolish with the mad joy of motion and existence. I would sweep round and round the Castle towers, cutting the air with rushing wings, uttering that exuberant cry whose delight no sound in earth or sky can match, beside whose shrill rapture the Hallelujah Chorus is an abject jingle! But now it is your turn. I shall expect something edifying, recollect."

"Mine? O, I have been pondering the question half the day, and I have at last decided that the highest happiness is to give adoration."

"You are of opinion then, that in that

case, if in no other, it is more blessed to give than to receive?"

"Yes, a thousand times more blessed! He who receives worship is uninterested, often wearied by it, he knows his own failings and is conscious that he is unworthy of the homage paid him. But to adore—I know not why that should be so rapturous, so blessed, unless it be that adoration was the supreme purpose for which the human soul was formed. This joy of being fascinated, of surrendering up self to one whose nature impels one to the sacrifice—this joy that transforms Earth into Paradise, dull death into life—enables me to understand, Kenelm, how the true bliss of Heaven will be, not peace, nor holiness, nor rest, but worship—the worship of One, Who all-satisfying, will yet excite to ever fresh desire."

"You begin then already to discover that human love cannot *satisfy*?" and he looked at her half wistfully as though he would fain have had her answer "yes!" Her love to him was sweet and yet sharp—it bit him oft-times with a sense of guilt.

"O, Kenelm!" she answered, turning her sweet eyes seriously upon him, "I dare not say that I have learnt that yet, or even that I desire to learn it. My love for you seems to absorb my whole being, and even to shut off into a cold background Him Who gave you to me."

"And yet, dear Geraldine," he persisted

softly, "it is only a short while since you told me that your new love had enriched and increased the old—that you now loved God, and your home, and your parents, more consciously than ever you had loved them before."

"I do," she answered earnestly. "But I fear, Kenelm, they are dearer only because glorified by the splendour of my great love for you—just as this sweet woodland scene is made divine by the red glory of the sunset, which gone, will leave it cold and grey."

"Life would still be lovely to you if I were gone or dead," he urged. "You would be thrown more entirely on the faithful tenderness of your family, and would cling to them with intensified dependency and trust."

"Lovely, perhaps; but as the night from which the sun has vanished. When the sky and earth are dark, Kenelm, we go to bed, and were you gone, I should hurry to my grave!"

A shadow passed over his face—the shadow of that blackest misery, the misery of remorse.

"But why should we talk so dolefully?" she continued, seeing that he looked sad, and rousing herself to speak with cheerfulness. "Death is always forestalled by gloomy presentiments, and I have none. Life throbs in all my veins, and my limbs are as yet too strong and active to submit to be bound up in cramping grave-clothes. And you," she

added with sudden fear, "surely you are haunted by no forebodings!"

"I! Oh, no! I have proved myself hard to kill, and feel as if I had years of life left in me yet."

"Away with dull care then, and let us give ourselves up to enjoyment!"

Changeable as a child, she laughed gaily, but he gave no answering smile.

"Dear child," he said at last, and there was a deep gentleness in his tone that in a moment sobered her, "I wish you would teach me to be good."

She looked at him with grave, fixed eyes.

"Oh, Kenelm, how you shame me by asking that; but the little that I have learnt from my father and mother about religion I will gladly teach you."

"Lessons in religion I do not ask; I fear—I shall not easily arrive at that. You must have found out by this time, Diney, that beyond the present life I have no hope. But your companionship has shamed me of my selfishness—has waked in me almost forgotten longings to give happiness to my race. Teach me some of your own kindness, that the woes of poor humanity may at least no more be aggravated by me."

His hopeless tone did not scare her as he had almost fancied that it would. She took it merely as the outcome of some half-acknowledged scepticism, in which she could not

believe that one so dear and gifted would abide.

"Faith and hope come certainly to those who wish to do the right," she answered, gently. "They that do His will shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God."

He did not undeceive her, nor reveal that his difficulty lay rather in practice than in faith, and Geraldine stole her hand timidly into his.

"Will you do one thing, dear Kenelm, which I desire most earnestly? Perform the first task I set you, since you have appointed me your monitor."

"What is it?" he asked, clasping the hand she had given him.

"It is a subject of which you have told me not to speak to you; about which, indeed, I am almost in the dark," she replied, with hesitation. "I want you to forgive your son, to let him be the first to benefit by your kinder feelings."

He turned his head away, and Geraldine felt his grasp tighten on her hand. Glancing up she caught a quiver on his lips and a dark look in his eyes, such as a fallen angel might have worn. She awaited tremblingly his answer.

"You ask a hard thing," he said, with a kind of gasp. "But I have vowed to consecrate my life to you, and I must deny you nothing that it is possible for me to give. I

promise you, then, that to the utmost of my power I will do what you demand."

The tears rose fast to her eyes, and he saw them drop upon her cheek. She had done what she had long yearned, yet scarcely dared to do, and a burden was lifted from her heart.

Her agitation showed him what the effort had cost her, and stooping, he kissed her with deep tenderness.

"Geraldine," he said, "you must never fear to say to me anything that is in your mind. God forbid that I should ever vex you by one rough or selfish word; but if through want of thought, or any sudden irritability, I should so forget myself, you must trust me to repent, and not punish me by taking away one fragment of your confidence. You cannot guess how feverishly I burn to make you happy."

He put his arm round her, and she clung to him with the tremulous eagerness of a passion almost too great for the heart that holds it. They sat on in musing, too deep for words—Geraldine conscious of his presence only. The golden sun sank below the horizon, the wood-pigeons cooed in the distant glades, the divine red gold faded and died upon the trees.

A strange cold calm crept over Lord Rotherhame. He felt that his path was chosen, and though that path led downwards to the abyss, it was peace to know that the

die was cast, the conflict over. To the links that had already fettered his soul back from restitution and repentance, one was added stronger than all others. Heavier than fear, pride, or filial duty, the love of this generous, trusting heart weighed on him now like a millstone, which he could never more shake off to rise to God and heaven. He seemed sinking in the deep—so slowly, so gently, lulled by such soft winds and rippling waves, that it was hard to believe that he was sinking, that soon the waters would close over his head, and his lost soul whirl unrestingly in the fathomless abyss. Hopeless, yet not all unhappy—for the fatal moment might be long delayed, and the receding glories of the Better World, and the passing beauties of the present, soothed him like an opiate with their intoxicating sweetness. Hopeless! for stern, proud, and ungenerous himself, he had come to believe that his God was even such an one, and forget that of Him it is written—“His ways are in the sea, His paths in the deep waters, His own will He bring again from the depths of the sea.”

Lord Rotherhame looked down at the face which rested on his shoulder, the face of her for whom he had resolved to give up his hope of salvation. Strange, passionate heart! he felt that sweet and gracious as she was, she could not satisfy its need, and a kind of elation seized him at the thought that her insufficiency gave some hue of merit to the

final act of fraud, which from duty to her he had now resolved to perpetrate.

He reminded her soon that the dew was falling, and made her rise from her heathy couch. She walked on with a light heart and swinging step, her hat off, and sprays of nuts and honeysuckle twisted in her hair. Little did she think that she herself, whose highest, sweetest aim was to comfort her beloved one, and lead him on to faith and hope, was to be to him the occasion of mortal sin.

“Yes,” he thought, “since my heart is not mine to give her, let her freely take all else. Pride, honour, conscience, life, the hope of immortality, I give them all to her. God accept the sacrifice, and save her soul from the piercing sword !”

CHAPTER VIII.

Off with the old love, and on with the new.

"How homelike it looks!" said Geraldine, presently, as up a long arched glade she caught sight of the Castle towers. "And yet I have only known it eight months."

"It has been a home for six hundred years, and it ought by this time to know its vacation."

"Age is the crowning beauty of architecture to my mind," said Geraldine. "With buildings, as with men, the hoary head is a crown of glory. Happily, the heavenly mansions date from before the Conquest, so there we shall not be oppressed by modern notions."

"You are a true child of the nineteenth century, Geraldine; passionate love of the past blends in you with passionate love of progress. Hark! I hear horses' hoofs. If my ears do not deceive me," he added, looking up, "your old friend Lord Fitzcharles is on that tall steed. He has been paying you a visit of congratulation, I suspect."

"Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!" she answered shuddering. "It is too sad that this lovely ramble should be spoiled by Lord Fitzcharles. If he stops to talk to

you, I shall go straight home; I must not give him the chance of cutting me again."

"You can avenge yourself now, if you care to," said Lord Rotherhame. "Fitzcharles is by this time on the rack as to the reception he may meet with from you. He knows that on your nod depends his future admission to Rotherhame, which right of *entrée* he seems oddly enough to look on as a privilege."

"I should be sorry, indeed, to stand in his way," she answered, with a somewhat scornful kindness. "But you must introduce us formally; I don't feel at present that I have any right to consider myself on the list of his Lordship's acquaintance."

The horse bearing Lord Fitzcharles had now come close, and its rider, knitting his brows, was peering through the twilight with his customary fixed and rather insolent stare.

"He takes us for 'John and Fanny out a courting,'" whispered Lord Rotherhame, smiling; but no sooner had the new-comer recognised the hatless, ungloved girl as the future Countess of Rotherhame, than, with a quite remarkable effort of gallantry, he sprang from his horse and approached her hat in hand.

"Evening, Rotherhame," he began, "delighted to have fallen in with you. I've been waiting up at the house for half an hour, or more, in hopes of your coming in."

for, as you may imagine, it was a sharp disappointment to find Miss Egerton out when I came to pay her my respects. How do ye do, Miss Egerton?"

Here he bowed, and replaced his hat, and with a slight relapse from this unwonted politeness to his customary familiarity, stretched out, not two fingers merely, but all five. Geraldine drew back a step.

"May I introduce my friend, Lord Fitzcharles?" said Lord Rotherhame, a slight smile curling his lip. "I think he once had the pleasure of meeting you in my house; but, perhaps, you have forgotten?"

Geraldine bowed, and after a moment's hesitation held out her hand in token of restored amity. It seemed to her impossible now to keep malice against any one, though the sight of her ancient foe recalled vividly, ignominious memories. Her reluctance, however, had not escaped his notice, and his Lordship found some difficulty in taking with a good grace the salutary coldness of his once despised antagonist.

"I must beg to offer Miss Egerton my hearty congratulations on the happy event which I hear is impending," he said.

"Change them to condolences, Fitzcharles," returned Lord Rotherhame. "Is it not written—

Crabbèd age and smiling youth
Cannot dwell together."

"Indisputable! But I fail to see the appli-
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cation in the present instance. A friend of ours appalled me the other day, Rotherhame, by asserting that you had reached the wrong side of forty, but I declined to believe it till after a personal inspection of your baptismal register."

"Not far from the truth—at all events, I am in my fortieth year, while this young lady is at 'sweet seventeen!' I am sorry we were out when you called. Is it too late for you to turn back and have some tea?"

"Thanks, my dear fellow! but I waited till the last moment on the chance of catching you, and as dinner is to an Englishman the pivot of the day, the be-all and end-all of existence, you will, I am sure, pardon my continuing my homeward route. Can't I persuade you, Miss Egerton, to ride over one of these days and take your lunch at my little shooting-box at Rookdale?"

"Thank you very much. I have never seen Rookdale," she answered, evasively; and once more shaking hands, with a few added civilities on Lord Fitzcharles' side, the little party separated.

"The parson's daughter is already quite the fine lady," muttered Fitzcharles, savagely, as he rode out of earshot; "turning up her nose, and staring one out of countenance with her big round eyes! What Rotherhame can see to admire in that milkmaid style of beauty, I really am at a loss to imagine, unless, like the young woman herself, he

mistakes airs for grace, and conceit for dignity."

"Is he really a friend of yours?" asked Geraldine, meanwhile, in a tone of remonstrance.

"A friend! What an opinion you must have of my taste! I don't know what we have in common, except handles to our names—a very close bond of union in my Lord Fitzcharles' opinion—and a general fondness for antiquities, which, I suppose, he likes by way of contrast, being but a mushroom himself. People are living who remember his grandfather, a knavish attorney at St. Dunstan's. But he always makes himself agreeable to me, and a pleasant neighbour is an advantage."

"I believe you have a secret tenderness for anyone who flatters you," she returned, laughing. "See, there is another loving couple, I declare," and she pointed out two fresh figures advancing towards them along the twilight road. "What fun if they should turn out to be Robert Bogle and his lady-love."

"For *your* sake I hope not. I should be sorry for your feelings to be harrowed by an encounter with your successful rival. However, you are safe from personal violence; I don't think my godson will kick you while I am by."

"Oh, Kenelm, I have told you a hundred times that that kick existed only in my fears.

I must own, however, that I had been provoking enough to warrant my anticipating an act of vengeance."

Lord Rotherhame scarcely heeded what she said, his attention being rivetted on the young lady who leaned on Robert's arm. The pair were about the same height, but Robert's bulk contrasted oddly with the artificial and wasp-like slimness of his fair companion. The flaxen fringe, curled coquettishly over the low forehead, the small hazel eyes, the tiny foot, recalled with painful vividness the memory of another. Geraldine observed nothing of the shadow on his face—twilight was falling, and her eyes were engaged in amused contemplation of Mr. Bogle, who, with a latent hope of piquing her, was whispering mysteriously to Caroline, with chin affectionately resting on her shoulder. The young lady was endeavouring to conceal her embarrassment by giggling, pouting, and a hollow pretence of ignoring the new-comers. Robert's habitual reverence for "the Earl," however, forbade his falling in with her design, and in answer to Lord Rotherhame's salutation, he stopped and clumsily shook hands.

"Best take the bull by the horns," he had muttered to his companion, in accordance with which sage axiom his next proceeding was to blurt out a request that "Lord Rotherhame would allow him to introduce him to Miss Caroline Bradshaw."

"Indeed, Robert," returned his godfather, taking off his hat, and discreetly ignoring his former acquaintance with Caroline, "I only discovered this morning that I had to congratulate you. I am fortunate to have secured so early an introduction to Miss Bradshaw."

His manner was ceremoniously polite, but forgetfulness of injuries was not a strong point in Lord Rotherhame's character, and he did not volunteer to make the ladies acquainted with each other.

Caroline acknowledged his bow with a slight nod, and expressed her general indifference by opening and closing her eyes wearily, with the langour of a dying fish.

"Carrie is so pleased with the forest, Lord Rotherhame," said Robert, anxious to atone for his companion's coldness. "We have been pottering about here for the last hour, glad to get away from the house, where the girls are always about. The fact is, one can't make sure of a moment's privacy unless one goes out walking."

"I hope you will allow me the pleasure of showing you my old house, Miss Bradshaw, before you leave the neighbourhood," said Lord Rotherhame, with a feeble attempt at doing something civil, "that is, if you care for old houses as well as for scenery."

"Thank you! I have seen a good many old places lately," drawled out Caroline, with an air of magnificent nonchalance. "Do



you think we shall be able to spare the time, Bob ?”

“Oh, of course we shall, darling,” answered Bob, who, as much surprised as gratified by his godfather’s friendly tone, felt appalled at her *insouciant* manner of receiving his advances. “You will like the Castle amazingly ; it’s a stunning old place.”

“I’ve not the least doubt it is very pretty, only I happen to have seen something in the same style rather lately. Mamma and I were staying last month with a gentleman friend, who has built a splendid old castle somewhere on the Thames. But we will come if we can manage it, only I really think we must not linger now,” and, with a weary sigh, she resumed the arm which she had temporarily dropped. “Oh, my parasol has fallen ! Would you hand it to me please, Lord—Lord—Rotherhame ?”

Robert shuddered at her audacity with mingled horror and admiration, and Lord Rotherhame, having obeyed her mandate and again bowed politely, the two couples separated, just in time to prevent an untimely explosion of laughter from Geraldine.

“Diney, you are the most naughty and irrepressible child,” said Lord Rotherhame, unable to resist joining in her smothered peal. “Shame on you for a giggling school-girl ! I positively felt the earth shake as you stood behind me, twisting your head, too, and thrusting your handkerchief into

your mouth in that fearfully palpable manner. I beg that you don't show yourself when Miss Bradshaw comes to pay me her promised visit, or I shall for ever lose credit in her eyes."

"It is plain you did not succeed in making a very favourable impression on the young lady," she replied, in blissful ignorance of all previous passages between Lord Rotherhame and Caroline. "How she did snub you! She evidently thought you wanted a little taking down."

Chatting and laughing gaily, the two reached home, and passed in from the fresh evening air to the grey gloom of the old hall. The candles had not yet been lighted, and the atmosphere, cold and dark, struck with something of a chill on Geraldine's senses. She knew not why, but a vague dread crept over her, as if bad news must be awaiting them. Nothing, however, more exciting happened than the rapid appearance of a footman with lights, and, bidding each other adieu till dinner time, the betrothed pair departed in contrary directions.

CHAPTER IX.

Now the last day of many days,
All beautiful and bright as thou,
The loveliest and the best is dead.

SHELLEY.

SEATED on the window-sill in the silver twilight, Geraldine was enjoying a short lull after the hurry and excitement of the day. These periods of silence and solitude were to her almost a necessity. She must have times when she could sit idle, and take the measure of her happiness. It seemed too great—a thing which eluded her hold and slid away into the infinite, yet which she must at least attempt to grasp, lest, bubble-like, it should burst and disappear before she had realised that it had been hers.

Did the briefness and uncertainty of all human things weigh already on this girl, whose lips had but touched as yet the brimming cup of life? And was it the consciousness of its unstability that made her new-born joy appear so precious beyond all price? Truly, summer's perfection is the precursor of decline, and the full-blown rose will fall the soonest! Something there was about the intensity of her bliss that troubled her with a sensation akin to fear—it was an almost giddy height of blessedness; and yet it would be untrue to say that her misgiving

assumed any form of tangible anxiety. The present was too engrossing for her to sacrifice many of its precious moments to the indulgence of apprehensions for the future; in the ecstatic present she was content to live.

Dawson, having dressed her young mistress for dinner, had, according to her instructions, extinguished the candles and left her alone with her happy dreams. The dying sun had left rich traces of his presence on the western sky, and about the crimson glow on the horizon verge, were bars of amber, brown and cream, warm and beautiful as the memories of a departed life. Elsewhere, like the rough future of the bereaved, the autumn night was advancing wild and dark, and from behind a grey shifting mass of clouds the moon was rising pale and yellow. A breeze was freshening across the long, still reaches of grass, rousing all the leaves to rustle. Leaning her head far out, she gazed with instinctive yearning into the infinite heights of solemn darkness that rose above the clouds.

The soul, native of the skies, never wholly forgets her birth-place, and in all deep emotions of joy or sorrow vaguely feels herself a stranger upon earth ! Are we not taught that here all things are changing, deceitful, insecure ? And though Geraldine knows this truth as yet by hearsay only, can we wonder that, as from afar, she looks towards her true spirit-home, she longs to fly thither.

with those she loves, and seal her happiness with the crowning benediction of immortal life.

The sound of the gong—swelling tumultuously from dully throbbing pulsations to a resounding roar—roused her from her musings. With a sigh she closed the window, and threaded her way along the dimly-lit galleries that led to the Red Drawing Room. Passing her mother's bedroom, she saw through the open door that her parents had already gone downstairs, and the light of their fire streamed cheerily out into the passage.


Miss Nutting, who usually made her entrance into the drawing-room on her pupil's protecting arm, had to-night preceded her for half-an-hour's private conference with her lover, Mr. Meules being that evening a guest at the Castle. So Geraldine for the first time traversed the ancient building alone in the dark. Three small steps led into the great picture gallery, into which the quiet twilight was stealing, dimly veiling in uniform grey the gay hues of the family portraits. Seen indistinctly in the falling shades of evening, the tall ladies in trains and ruffs, and the stately gentlemen in velvet coats or armour, seemed almost as if they were alive—a dumb but sentient company. What a strange, fantastic masquerade would appear could they all but step forth from their frames!—a troop of knights and dames who

for long centuries had stared at each other across that gallery, and who yet had no personal acquaintanceship, and could boast no ties but common blood and a niche in the same burial-vault. Their silent stare made her uncomfortable, and she hurried on to the brilliantly lighted drawing-room. Lord Rotherhame had not yet appeared. Mr. Daubeney was seated by her mother's side, listening to her simple feminine outpourings—so inconsequent, and yet so true, with the incontrovertible truth of pure womanly instinct. Mr. Meules was studying with Nina her book of Christmas and Easter cards, and the Archdeacon was deep in the latest edition of the *Times*.

“Darling fellow!” said Geraldine, pulling the paper out of his hands, “do put up that horrid old *Times* and talk to me a little. I feel as if I want so dreadfully to sit upon your knee and go to sleep by the fire!”

“Ah! you won't have your poor old father to put you to sleep much longer, now that you are going to run away and leave us all, naughty child!” he answered, fondly patting her cheek.

“I hate to leave you and my sweet precious mother, and there is only one person in the world I would ever do it for,” she answered, leaning her head against his shoulder. “And even with him I don't know that I shall ever be able to bear being parted from you all.”



"Don't fret about that, my little darling," said her father, as he saw the ready tears standing in her eyes. "We shall come and see you very often, and you will come home to us, so that altogether we shall never feel that we have lost you. And beyond this world, you know, there is a happy home where the families broken up on earth meet again in the Heavenly Father's presence. Remember that, my sweet child, whenever you are tempted to be too much engrossed in this present life, and never let any earthly idol come between you and Him Who should be the supreme object of your soul's love."

"I feel as if I had often been so horrid at home," said Geraldine, with a real though not very apparent sequence of ideas, "as if I had not half appreciated you and my mother, though all the time, even when I was most cross and disagreeable, I was worshipping you in my heart."

"No one who knows anything of what goodness really is, can feel satisfied as he looks back upon his past life," answered her father gently. "But on the whole," he added smiling, "I must say you have been a good child; at all events, we shall somehow or other find it very hard to get on without you."

"One feels so safe with you in the dear old house where we all were born, father dear, and there is something rather frightening about beginning a totally new life."

"But you don't repent your determination, do you?" the Archdeacon asked a little anxiously, and glancing towards Lord Rotherhame, who at that moment entered.

"O no," she answered, with a sudden flush, following the direction of his eyes; "I think I could follow Kenelm to the ends of the earth, and even beyond them."

"He returns you many thanks," said a voice behind her, and, looking round, she saw that Lord Rotherhame had joined them. "We should do well to make sure though that we shall alight in the same place, before we take our leap in the dark together."

"Eavesdropper!" exclaimed Geraldine; "what business have you to listen to my private conversation with my father?"

"I have been so well rewarded that I shall feel tempted to try it again. A compliment that one is not meant to hear, has all the sweetness of stolen waters."

"And one can feel sure that it is sincere," said the Archdeacon, "which is not always the case with pretty speeches."

"Here comes Dr. Bogle," whispered Lord Rotherhame, as the butler appeared in the doorway. "He met me out this morning, and invited himself to dinner! I hope I didn't show how unwilling I felt. His alleged object is to see something of you, Archdeacon, so remember, I consider him your affair this evening, and wash my hands of him."

The Archdeacon smiled and shook his head,



but Lord Rotherhame, true to his word, exchanged merely the briefest greetings with the Doctor, and led him straight up to the Archdeacon, with a malicious smile at Geraldine.

"Now, Doctor, sit down and monopolise the Archdeacon to your heart's content. I am going to be very unselfish, and give him up to you entirely this evening; and, lest my inclination should prove too much for my good intentions, I will at once put a respectful distance between us. Come, Diney, our lay presence must not violate the sanctity of the ecclesiastical synod."

Both the clergymen laughed with a rather rueful expression, and the Doctor exclaimed, in a heartfelt tone—

"As if *he* could ever be in the way! I expect you and I shall not be long before we call in our laity to assist us in our councils, eh, Egerton?"

"I am so glad," said Lord Rotherhame vindictively, as he stood with Geraldine in the embrasure of the window, and pushing aside the silk drapery, looked out into the solemn, fragrant garden; "now he will spend a dull evening."

"Kenelm!" exclaimed Geraldine, in a displeased tone, "I had a dim suspicion just now that there was a flavour of spitefulness in your joke, but I put it away as too injurious to be entertained."


"Oh, it must out!" he replied. "I do

feel spiteful to-night, as if I should like to scalp him ! Civilisation has its drawbacks, decidedly ; it deprives one of all safety-valves by which to let off superfluous steam."

"From Dr. Bogle's point of view, that can hardly be called a drawback of civilisation, which saves him from being scalped to indulge your ill-humour," said Geraldine, unable to help laughing, though she tried to look severe. "I don't know why you are so particularly set against him to-night, but if you wished to annoy him, I think you would have done better to stay with him yourself than to leave him to papa."

"That's just it," interrupted Lord Rotherhame. "He annoyed me to begin with by forcing his company on us to-night, and made matters worse by inventing the hypocritical plea that he wanted to see your father. I knew all the time that he prefers my company to his—not for the honest, intelligible reason that he loves the darkness rather than the light, but because my earldom has a gew-gaw attraction for his sordid nature. Faugh ! you have no notion how his flunky love sickens me ! how degraded I feel at being its involuntary object !"

His face of utter disgust so tickled her sense of humour, that Geraldine burst into a convulsion of laughter, throwing herself back with a sudden movement, which brought her elbow into painful contact with a large mirror on the wall behind them. There was a shock,



a smash, and several fragments of the strong, sheeny surface fell with sharp, confused clatter to the ground. She uttered a startled cry, glancing from the broken glass to her cut elbow, on which drops of blood began to appear. But quickly recollecting herself, she was about hurriedly to assure him that she was not hurt, when he roughly grasped her shoulder and shook her. She looked up and saw that his face had changed, and wore an expression of real anger.

"What a blundering little fool you are!" he exclaimed. "Why can't you look what you are about?"

Geraldine turned pale, and gazed at him with a fixed and frightened stare. At the same moment the others came hurrying up in a body to see what had happened, and whether she was hurt.

"She's like a bull in a china shop, always breaking something," said Lord Rotherhame, turning to them with a forced laugh, and speaking still in the same rasping key. "Last winter it was my goblet, now it's the mirror!"

"Most unfortunate, I am sure," said the Doctor, venturing to infuse a little malevolent emphasis into his words.

"Are you hurt, darling?" cried her mother. "Let me look at the poor arm at once, and see if any splinters have got into it."

Lord Rotherhame, a look of compunction

softening the anger on his face, lifted it, and looked anxiously at the little wound. Geraldine withdrew it coldly.

"Thank you, I am not hurt," she said; "it is the merest scratch. I can do nothing but apologise for my awkwardness."

"Do let me see," he said, penitently; "there may be a splinter in it, and Dr. Pyke used to tell me that I was a surgeon born."

"There is nothing," she answered, with resolution; "I should feel it if there were."

"Have your own way then," he rejoined, with a displeased laugh, and turning on his heel. "Doctor, what was the offertory last Sunday?"

Geraldine felt inclined to cry, but succeeded in restraining herself. Her mother tied up her arm with a pocket-handkerchief, and before the footman had time to gather up the fragments on the carpet, the summons to dinner came. The Doctor and Mr. Daubeny were both ready to claim her hand, but she shrunk from them, and clung tightly to her father's arm.

"Ought you not to go with Mr. Daubeny?" he whispered.

She shook her head; she was feeling unstrung and over-wrought, and could not bring herself to face a long hour of company talk. So her father made a smiling apology to the two gentlemen, and led her downstairs, remembering tenderly as he went, the many

times he had carried her in his arms when a dimpled, crowing baby, or held her hand as the unsteady little feet essayed their first timorous journeys into the great unknown world.

It was not a pleasant dinner to Geraldine. She seldom risked a glance at her future husband, but she could tell by his voice that he was ill at ease, and she knew that he found it difficult to join in the conversation. Once or twice she caught him shooting furtive glances in her direction, and once, stealing a look at him, she saw that he looked miserable. Gradually her displeasure died—she began to see that it must have been something deeper than annoyance about a broken treasure which had moved him to speak in a manner so unlike himself; and pity awoke, soon merging into tenderness and self-reproach.


The Archdeacon did not fail, when after dinner he found himself sitting apart with Mr. Daubeney, to catechise him in a low voice on the extraordinary irritability which Lord Rotherhame had displayed.

"I can't at all understand it," he said. "In any case, it seems an ill-natured thing to show anger about an accident, and it is particularly unlike Rotherhame to do so. I remember how very kind and nice he was last Christmas when we were dining up here to meet the farmers, and poor Geraldine had a misfortune of the same kind."

Mr. Daubeny hesitated, cast a glance at Lord Rotherhame, and finding him engrossed in a money calculation with the Rector, answered softly—

“For a man of his intellect he is curiously superstitious. I have often tried to reason him out of his mistaken faith in omens and presentiments, and there are times when he will laugh at them himself. But at others, instead of my converting him, I have found myself strangely infected with his gloomy doctrines. I think he drank them in with his first breath; at all events, Mrs. Weedon, in whose charge he spent his childish years, brought him up upon them. And then I have often found that the absence of a firm religious faith leaves the mind more open to the vagaries of superstition.”

“Without doubt. The truth is, that till our popular theology is sounder than it is at present, the people will be more or less the prey of all manner of terrors and delusions. Till the God of Calvinism—the capricious monster who out of the great mass of mankind picks his victims by the bushel, his favourites by the handful—is relegated to his proper place in the Pantheon of Paganism; till the God of Mediævalism, who can be bribed out of the pleasure of inflicting torment; till the God of 19th-century-Christianity—who punishes an innocent baby for the want of a ceremony which it never had the chance of undergoing, who treats



ignorance as vice, misfortune as a crime; who sets an immoral example and punishes his creatures for following it—can be banished utterly, superstition will flourish—people will always feel themselves the sport of chance, the prey of fantastic caprice. Once let mankind understand that a God of perfect wisdom, boundless love, sympathetic justice, is at the helm of its destiny—that every smallest circumstance is an integral part of the mighty plan on which the universe is being brought to its perfection, and doubt and distrust will vanish. ‘Perfect love casteth out fear, because fear hath torment,’ and the love that can thus triumph over our fancies, our ignorance, our vague alarms, is not our sentiment towards God, that feeble, vacillating, fluctuating thing, but His to us—changeless, vast, eternal.”

“And would you feel no qualm, no disagreeable shock to your confidence, supposing an omen, such as this of the mirror, was followed by a catastrophe?” asked Mr. Daubeny, a little curiously. “Confess now, Archdeacon, that if to-night, for instance, a sudden death took place in the house, you would feel a little troubled in your mind next time you broke a mirror.”

“Indeed, I should do no such thing. I should know that to imagine any connection between the two events would be the most puerile childishness. Life is full of troubles; we are constantly on the verge of them with-

out knowing it, and we may well be so at the present moment. But it is contrary to all laws of science and common-sense to suppose that they can have anything to do with the casual breaking of a bit of glass. I recollect the night before my wedding I broke a little looking-glass in the hotel where I was spending the night, but I don't think any couple ever had a more undividedly prosperous time than we two for the first few years of our married life. We have had our share of trials since, and rather more than our share of enjoyment. No, Daubeney, you and Lord Rotherhame have both been affected by the place you live in ; a beautiful old dwelling-place it is indeed ! but not the most wholesome for people of imaginative temperament."

He looked round him as he spoke, on the dimly-seen portraits, the darkly wainscotted walls, the high black chimney-board, whose ghoulisb carvings rose sombre and indistinct above his head ; and involuntarily drew his chair nearer to the fire, with a secret longing to quit the great gloomy feudal castle, and breathe once more the free air of his own cheerful rectory.

CHAPTER X.

"There is a great gulf fixed."

ST. LUKE xvi, 26.

MEANWHILE Geraldine was sitting alone in a little outer hall, which opened from the Red Drawing Room, and of which Lord Rotherhame had made a kind of amateur museum. The Duchess of Naseby, who had a mania for everything that was bizarre, had given him a number of curiosities. These were arranged about the room in strange medley. Glass cases containing Roman pottery, fossil fishes, and geological specimens, were interspersed broadcast with stuffed birds, pieces of armour, disused weapons, Mohawk feathers, ivory carvings, missals and triptychs of painted wood. But the presiding genius of the place was a large stone Sphinx, which the Duchess had had sculptured for her nephew, and which she had given him with the assurance that it would teach him something more than he had ever learnt from his Bible, viz., that he knew nothing, and that there was nothing to be known. Lord Rotherhame loved this Sphinx. He had once told Geraldine that it was almost the only thing left him in the world about whose fascination he had not been disillusioned, that in days when his fellow creatures fretted him, and even.

Nature seemed tedious, he found in it a companionship which awed and stilled him—an inspiration in its sightless eyes.

So to the Sphinx's shrine came Geraldine to-night, to see whether it would work a charm for her. She sat on the low wide window-seat, the moonlight streaming through the mullioned panes, and playing fantastically on ivory idols, classic busts, and on the large cold outline and wise impenetrable face of their recumbent chief. Geraldine gazed on it silently, and began to feel its spell, and to burn with unlawful longing to steal from it its Secret; the great Secret which for all past ages of the world's history had foiled the patient investigation of the keenest brains, and still in these later days remains unanswered and unanswerable as ever. Unanswerable, save by that of which the Sphinx is the symbol, that only One to whom all problems lie open, who keeps the door of all the mysteries which have broken good men's hearts, and driven wise men mad—keeps the door, and keeps it locked!

"Does the Sphinx know about me?" wondered Geraldine. "Can human joys and sorrows find any echo in that impassive breast? Are those inscrutable eyes looking into my future? seeing, perhaps, bitter griefs ahead of which I do not dream, beholding, it may be, my tombstone, or worse still, his?"

"I guessed you had fled here, little nun," said a gentle voice behind her, which made her heart leap up. "Why did you run away and hide? It was uncivil, to say the least of it, not to wait for me. I have been looking for you everywhere," he went on as she continued silent. "I wanted to make my apologies; I believe I must have behaved like a brute to you just now—what I said I don't remember; but I have a vague and horrible impression that I swore at you."

"No, you didn't quite do that," said Geraldine, looking up with a smile into his perturbed face. "It is certainly not very usual to call ladies 'fools,' but that was the extent of your offence."

He coloured.

"How utterly abominable of me! Did I really? I believe you must be inventing it to plague me."

"No, it is true; but don't think any more of it."

"You ought not to be so easy-going, so indulgent," he said, sitting down on the window seat, and putting his arm round her. "I deserve punishment for having forgotten to behave like a gentleman, especially to you!"

"But then I should be punishing myself too," said Geraldine, leaning her head against his shoulder, and feeling as if she would like to leave it there for ever. "But tell me why you were so angry with me, Kenelm? I was

calculating the expense of a new mirror all through dinner, and meditating offering you the remnant of my last allowance."

Lord Rotherhame laughed, but faintly.

"I'll tell you," said he. "I happened to be in one of those pleasant moods to-night, when one's mind is a prey to every variety of bad presentiment. Coming events cast their shadows before them, they say; I begin to feel something of their dark, distant approach, like one feels the thunder in the air long before the storm bursts. When you smashed the mirror, it seemed to me that suddenly my forebodings took shape, and that your blunder had drawn down the hovering misfortune inevitably upon us."

"I'm rather glad you are superstitious," said Geraldine, "as you will not pour scorn on me, if I now and then give way to the weakness."

"It will be only 'now and then.' Superstition does not seem to suit with you, any more than ghosts with noonday sunshine. Your nature seems always fresh, well-balanced, wholesome—like one would imagine a human being would be if newly created out of nothing, instead of being born of human parents, and coming into the world with all the compound multiplication of its ancestry's sins and sicknesses in its thin impoverished blood. What a Dead Sea human life has become since the far off day when the Holy Ghost moved on the face of the

waters! its pleasures rotten as Dead Sea fruit, its very sorrows sickeningly stale. You seem one of the few things left alive in the universal stagnation, thanks to the large stock of vitality you brought with you from heaven. Don't spend it too recklessly, that's all! and like gas in a balloon it may serve to carry you back again one of these days."

"Do you know," whispered Geraldine, clinging closer to him, "I, too, have been a little oppressed by presentiments this evening. My heart felt light as air till tea time; you remember how just after we had boiled the kettle I threw myself down on the hearth and said 'I'm too happy.' Then papa took up his glass of milk, and for a kind of joke drank my health, and called out, 'The feast is full!' I don't know why, but that fell on my heart like a tolling bell."

"Solon said, 'Call no man happy till he is dead,' and a great love like yours, my Geraldine, is sure to bring some trouble in its wake. Fire does not warm alone, it burns. But you must not allow the unknown Future to terrify you," and he drew her closer to him with soothing tenderness. "For you, life with all its vicissitudes of weal and woe, is, and must be blessed. Only those unhappy beings who, having quarrelled with the Almighty, are left, as St. Jude says, 'to wander in the mist of darkness for ever,' need fear the lawless caprices of fickle chance—in other words, need be superstitious. To

those who love God, whose will moves with the Great Ruling Will of the Universe, all things work on a fixed plan for a definite end, and that end their highest good. It is my greatest comfort to know that this is so with you, and in whatever distant nebula of fire-swept worlds my light at last may flicker to extinction, it will be to the final moment joy to think of the calm glory in which you will be shining, bright and glad for ever and for ever."

"You make me think of the Prodigal Son," said Geraldine softly. "While he ate husks in the alien land he lost all memory of what his father was like, imagined that he could forget that he was his own flesh and blood, and would consent to make a hired servant of him."

"Yes, but he had to arise and return; the father would never have come to fetch him from his husks," returned Lord Rotherhame.

"He saw him a great way off, he ran to meet him," said Geraldine. "And all the while, before he moved at all, the father's heart must have been drawing him, irresistibly attracting him like a magnet. It is my belief that attraction is the law of the moral Universe as much as of the physical. Just as systems of worlds are kept from wandering wildly away into the boundless Infinite by the secret power of other suns at an incalculable distance of space, so I believe

our hearts, while mutually dependent on each other, radiate round the great unseen Heart of God, which keeps them, even in the widest cycles, from total loss."

"But as the sun's power is diminished by distance," said Lord Rotherhame, "so it may well be, that souls whose cycles ever widen into greater distance, may at last come within the attraction of some other luminary, as great, but baleful instead of good, and so be gradually lured away beyond the reach of the benignant Light of Life."

"It *may* be so, but as long as any sparks of love or goodness linger, we may be sure that we have not reached that fatal state. Because love is of God; and where Love is, God and Hope are still!"

"Is it so? Then there is a chance still for Francesca da Rimini; poor little Francesca, whom I can never wholly pity! Come into the garden, Diney," he added, rising suddenly, as if he would put away the thought that had risen unbidden with his last words. "Our little astronomical allegory reminds me of the talk we had together that first night in London; do you remember how we discussed the Moon?"

"Don't I remember?" she answered, standing up while he took a great-coat down from the wall and wrapped her in it. "My heart never beat so fast as it did that night, and yet I took in every word you said, and can recall them now."

He took her hand and led her out upon the terrace.

The sky was mottled all over with fleecy clouds, whose shifting motions revealed a dark abyss beyond. A light wind blew upon their faces from across the far moorland, and the yet more distant sea; and the moon, as she climbed the heavens, was reflected a thousand times in a thousand dewy mirrors. The towers and battlements of the old Castle rose up solemnly against the sky.

"What a long while ago that evening seems!" said Geraldine, as hand in hand they paced the terrace. "I think joy must age as well as sorrow, for I feel years older since then."

"Joy can hardly be said to 'age.' To 'age' is to lose strength and bloom, hair and teeth, to have wrinkles in one's forehead, one's senses dulled, one's faculties impaired, one's straight back bent. Time and sorrow will do that for each of us fast enough—the province of joy is to mature and perfect. You are far nearer perfection now than when I knew you first."

"So much for masculine vanity," she answered laughing, "my improvement then is to be set down to intercourse with you?"

"That is a perverse misrepresentation. Ridicule me if you please, but I shall still stand by and behold with delight the sweet fruit mellowing into ripe perfection under God's good sun of happiness."

"But is it in accordance with the laws of Nature, that fruit or flowers should attain perfection in sunshine alone, without the bracing influence of wind and rain?"

"In wind and rain weeds grow apace as well as flowers," he answered. "Shall I tell you what, in my experience, have been the fruits of Adversity? A cowed spirit, a weakened brain, a soured temper, and a distorted judgment. Misery's medicine disorders the digestion, makes courage abject, and unstrings the moral nerves."

"There are many remedies which, in the first instance, before they have assimilated well, disorder the constitution," said Geraldine, "but which afterwards are its salvation. God has all eternity to heal us in. We may safely trust ourselves in His hands, as in a wise physician's, and shall perhaps find one day that the cramps and faintness which we took to prove unskilful doctoring, were only the death-pangs of the old Adam, the inevitable suffering which accompanies birth to a new and higher life."

"I think you and I might sit as Pessimist and Optimist to some Royal Academician anxious for a new study, Geraldine. Well, the future will decide the controversy for us."

"I feel I can speak more bravely of sorrow than I used," she resumed, "now that I know I shall no longer have to bear it alone. I can never have to face a repetition of that dreadful fortnight when I believed myself

parted from you for ever—for estrangement of heart is, after all, the only true separation. Do you know, Kenelm, I was thinking this afternoon, that now I am going to be your wife, I ought to tell you everything, every passing thought and mood ; as long, of course, as I do not weary you. You must learn to look on me as your own possession, to do with as you like. I thought that, to prevent myself being too dependent on your society, and also to enhance the pleasure of our being together afterwards, I ought when we are married to spend a good part of the morning alone, reading and writing. Then in the afternoon I shall have the village to go into, and sometimes calls to pay, but often we must have delicious rides together across country, in the woods, and to the sea, and come home to an immense five o'clock tea, with toast, muffins, and all imaginable good things."

"How prosaic we can be in the moonlight," he interrupted, laughing.

"Yes," proceeded Geraldine with decision, "I must teach you the happiness of being comfortable ; an art at present hardly known to you. Then, when the evening creeps on, and you sit and think in the firelight, I shall not leave you alone, lest your moods of melancholy should take you unawares, and no one be near to distract or comfort you. You need never feel yourself called on to talk to me ; I have always plenty to think about, and

shall be quite content to sit in silence and feel that you are near. Solitude is doubly nice when it is sociable solitude."

"And the castles built in that golden head are really all for my comfort and happiness?" said Lord Rotherhame with something of emotion. "I am not used to being thought for like this."

His eyes shone as he spoke, and the trouble of his face faded wholly in the brightness of a glad smile.

They had reached the end of the terrace, and stood leaning over the balustrade, gazing down a long vista of shadowy glade and dewy grass, closed in the distance by the faint outline of the ivied church tower. Suddenly revealed by an opening in the trees, the sight made Lord Rotherhame shiver, and in fancy he seemed to behold a veiled form issuing from among the green, wet mounds on which the shadow of that old tower lay, and coming up the woodland glade to stretch out cold white arms in mournful, wordless, meek reproach. Guiltily it made him shrink back from the dreams of coming happiness which must mean treachery to the memory of the dead, and the still, veiled form seemed to stand between him and the fair, glowing girl whose hand was locked in his. Instinctively he dropped it, and, feigning to gather a spray of honeysuckle from the balustrade, drew a few inches further from her side. But she, absorbed in thoughts of almost delirious-

rapture, noted nothing of his abrupt change of mood, and her bright eyes shone on his face with undiminished confidence.

"To-night," she began in low, eager accents, "I realise, as I never could before, the impotence of death itself to part those who truly love. In the land of love, dearest, you will indeed be mine, as here you never can be—an ineffable union, deep and strong, untroubled by the cruel fear of parting."

Her passionate words seemed to him to imply that she had forgotten what he had told her when he asked her to be his wife, that she believed his love to equal hers, and they appeared to him to do dishonour to the memory he adored. Suddenly his lately-made resolve of self-consecration to her happiness faltered, was forgotten, and he made answer in a tone which fell coldly on her burning heart.

"It is a mere poetical illusion to speak of death as a uniter. Life is the mother of unity—death of uniformity. Yes, there is a unity in life worth having, the unity of those who work, think, exist, aspire together; but in death, what remains but uniformity? the uniformity of the dull cold grave, where, unthrilled by contact, men, women, and children lie side by side in the choking dust; where trouble cannot enter, because joy has ceased; where sin and sorrow are no more, for the drearily prosaic reason that there the planning brain, and the sinning, suffering,

striving heart, are dwindling away to nothingness, in the fatal grasp of corruption."

"Are we our bodies then?" asked Geraldine. "Cannot holy love, high purpose, immortal thought, elude the coarse grasp of material decay?"

"Orthodoxy would undoubtedly say yes," he answered indifferently.

"Why speak that word 'orthodoxy,' so scornfully, as if it signified something so very false and foolish?"

"You are an observant critic," he answered, half amused, half startled by the sharpness of her tone. "But you must not condemn me as a hopeless heretic if I sometimes put into words the thoughts which cross my brain, and which change with each changing mood. One's moods need not always be orthodox, you know, whatever one's creed may be?"

"But I cannot bear to hear you talk—even in joke—as if your hopes were bounded by the narrow horizon of this brief life. It makes one feel like being shut up in a small close attic, after wandering freely beneath the boundless Heaven. And since I knew that I was to be your wife, the thought has been continually with me, if the blossom of happiness is so sweet, what will the full fruition be? And what the peace, after this chequered, changeful world, of entering upon a life whose perfect bliss knows neither alloy nor interruption! We need an education to enable

us to understand what is meant by such a phrase as 'the fulness of joy.'"

"That is all very well for you, and for the rest of the small select circle who can make sure of an agreeable future. Remember, the orthodox creed has another side. It teaches that there is a life so akin to death as to bear its very name, the Second Death, stronger than love—strong enough to strangle the soul's feeble struggles after the infinite, and to wither it up in spiritual decay. Can you wonder that the common ruck of mankind should not cling fondly to a creed which holds out such a Future before them as their almost certain portion?"

Geraldine wondered. Hers was a simple faith, and loving and trusting her own parents as she did, it had not occurred to her to give a less confidence to her Heavenly Father. She began to speak, but Lord Rotherhame had fallen into a train of thought, and broke out again before she had time to utter a word.

"Life, and love, and hope, are sweet!" he exclaimed passionately—"can we look forward to their slow extinction with anything but horror and repulsion? Here, prejudice, misunderstanding, suspicion, sorrow, many waters, cannot quench love—they beat and strive, but cannot sever the embrace of those whom love makes one. But when the great Judgment is set, and the just go into life, and the unjust into torment, love itself must at last yield, and sink annihilated.

Annihilated!" he went on with a fresh burst of passion, "no, that shall never be! God may keep us from each other's touch, but He shall not break the union which—of His own essence—deathless and divine, defies time and space. Face to face we may not be, but heart to heart for ever! They call Him just, but is that justice which dooms innocent and guilty alike, to an eternity of vain, consuming craving? Could I be happy, beloved, kneeling amid white choirs of passionless angels, if you were far away, uncared for, and in pain? Heaven forbid! Your soul would cry from the dust of your dishonour and despair against the traitor-saint who sang Hosannas to your torturer. And I would choose to curse God, and dwell in agony with you, rather than offer homage to Him, who, dwelling in uncumbered blessedness, could coldly hear the moan of your wounded, helpless heart!"

He stopped, and then in a low, choked voice, hardly audible, murmured—

"Oh, my wife! my soul! my darling!"

A low sob, hastily suppressed, recalled him to the present.

He had led a solitary life so long, and had been so accustomed to follow without let or hindrance the lead of his passions and the vagaries of his fancy, that he had for the moment forgotten that Geraldine was by. A few minutes since, and the early passion he could not kill, and which continually, without

warning, flamed up afresh, had made him burn to remind her that he was not, never could be, hers; that he belonged to another who was dead. But now a pang of self-reproach shot through his heart. He took her by the shoulders as if she had been some small child, turned her to the light, and lifting her chin, looked into the large blue eyes, whose lashes were wet with tears. Tears, not of anger; the profane violence of his words had indeed shocked and grieved her, but that they had been addressed to another, not to herself, had seemed to her only natural, and she reddened with shame that she should have appeared to overrate his feeling for her. She did not murmur at her lot, it should surely be joy enough to be allowed to love and to give her life to him. Her meekness touched him with a sense of strangely pathetic tenderness, and stooping, he kissed her eyes.

"Forgive me, my gentle one," he said, "forgive me if you can, and still bear with my selfishness, and make me better by your dear presence and example. God grant me in time to become more worthy of you!"

Geraldine could not speak; she put her arms round his neck, and laid her head silently against his shoulder. The wind blew fresh, and he wrapped her up more closely from the cold. For some minutes they both stood without speaking, buried in their own thoughts. At last he whispered some-

thing in her ear, and a bright smile chased instantly all sorrow from her face.

"We will ask your parents this evening then," he answered. "The twenty-sixth of December—a strange, dreary time for a wedding, truly."

"The espousals of heaven and earth took place at such a season," she whispered solemnly.

Once more they stood in silent thought, and meantime the white moon, emerging from a fickle cloud-bank, looked coldly down on the soon-to-be-wedded pair. Ah, Moon, pale, fair Moon, a chill empire is thine! Poets have sung thee, sweet music has done thee homage, the weary have solaced themselves in thy mild radiance—thou hast repaid thy extollers with silence, thy lovers with madness. Heartless and lone, thou climbest the steep celestial heights, and behind a mask of magic loveliness, worn since the Creation, veilest the grinning features of a skull. For Death and Madness are in thy glance, and steal with poisoned dart into the soul of him whom thy false enchantments bind. Thou hast deceived the Sea, for beyond all others he adores thee; the mighty, unconquered Ocean is thy slave; he obeys thy will, thy path is on his waters, and weeping he kisses thy footprints!

"Look! what is that?" said Geraldine and taking Lord Rotherhame's arm she pointed downwards to a shrubbery of tall firs, whose silver tops murmured softly in the

night, from whose shady gloom a small party of men was emerging, bearing on their shoulders some heavy load, and moving slowly on the shining road that led up to the Castle.

"Some domestic treasure probably, on its way to the larder or still room," was Lord Rotherhame's verdict, as he cast a cursory glance towards the new comers. "Let us move up and down a little. The evening is fresh and you will be taking cold." And turning they began again to pace the terrace, speaking of lighter topics; a relief to Geraldine, after the strain that had been on her all the evening.

Suddenly the door of the conservatory opened, and Mr. Daubeny came towards them.

"Have you brought orders for this young lady to come in?" asked Lord Rotherhame smiling. "I was beginning to fear she had outstayed the limits of prudence."

"Not exactly that," returned Mr. Daubeny gravely, "though I fear I must interrupt your conversation. Some persons are waiting to see you, Lord Rotherhame, on pressing business in the library."

Something in his tone made Lord Rotherhame turn and look at him. Mr. Daubeny bent forward and whispered a few words in his ear. A slight feeling of uneasiness crept over Geraldine, but Lord Rotherhame's quiet manner reassured her.

"I am afraid I must leave you for a little,



Diney," he said, "it is necessary for me to see these people, and I may be detained some time. Good-night, in case you should not be in bed before I return. Daubeny, will you show Miss Egerton into the drawing-room?" taking her hand one moment in his own, he turned hastily away, while Geraldine followed, reluctantly following Mr. Daubeny, re-entered the house through the conservatory.


CHAPTER XI.

The moon made thy lips pale, beloved,
The wind made thy bosom chill.
The night did shed
On thy dear head
Its frozen dew, and thou didst lie
Where the bitter breath of the naked sky
Might visit thee at will.

SHELLEY.

ROTHERHAME hastened to the library. The whisper which had told him that Ralph was in his hands once more—Ralph, his genius! the traitor who could believe his own father a murderer, and who could let blood plot his ruin and disgrace!—was driven from his breast all softer feelings, all remembrance of the promise so given to Geraldine, and his heart was stirred stormily, as if stirred by a sulphurous fire from that bad place whence arise all evils that wreck humanity. He felt that inward seething well, and that was the first spark of a conflagration, unless quenched under in the moment of its birth, would grow and spread, till the roaring fire mocked all efforts at control. Half-remembering at the ferocity which he felt burning within, he asked himself—“Shall I let him keep my hands off him?” and he clenched his teeth with a passion which he could not quell.

As he opened the library door he encountered a small



company of labouring men, who, with shuffling feet and uncovered heads, like bearers at a funeral, were carrying on their shoulders a shutter, on which was the shrouded outline of a human form. Moved by an impulse of sudden awe, Lord Rotherhame drew back, and the villagers, preceding him into the library, laid their burden quietly on a sofa, and then stood regarding it in silence. Lord Rotherhame, impressed by their immovable and horrified solemnity with a strange sense of inward misgiving, dared not give utterance to the question on his lips, lest the answer should be "Dead!"

Wentworth came to his aid. He had opened the door to the simple *cortège* with his usual magnificent flourish, and now he came forward, and murmuring respectfully, "A little accident, my Lord," removed the blanket that had been thrown over the shutter, and revealed a white, still face, and eyes which, though partially unclosed, remained dull and unobservant when the lamplight fell on them. A slight shudder, as he was thus exposed to view, alone betrayed that Ralph was conscious.

His worst fears relieved, Lord Rotherhame—turned impatiently upon the awe-struck—villagers.

"Have you all lost your voices?" was his sharp inquiry. "What has happened? Will one of you tell me where and how you found him?"

"Found him in the copse nigh on Farmer Thompson's fields," answered, in a hoarse whisper, a big man in a smock frock; while, at a sign from his master, Wentworth hurried off to fetch restoratives. "Me and Martin was goin' whoam along through the me-ads, and we cuts across through copse, and Martin he was a sayin' how tall the ferns had growed, when of a sudden we sees a big openin' in em at the bottom of the pit; and, says I, 'there's somebody asleep or fallen down there, Martin,' I says, 'he'll catch his death if he lies down yonder in the swamp.' So we goes down to look, and there we finds his Lordship lying. He didn't move, sir, but I heard 'un groan; so I goes up to 'un, and makes my bow, and says, 'They'll be lookin' for 'ee at whoam, Lord Berkeley!' and he tried to say summat, but he couldn't; t'warnt no use, for a fit of coughin' came on terr'ble bad. So we picked 'un up and carried 'un to my house, and as he was all over in a rack of pains, my wife says as how we'd best bring 'un straight back to Castle before he got worse and couldn't be moved."

"At what hour did you find him?" inquired Lord Rotherhame.

"An hour and a half ago, my Lord. We couldn't get him along no quicker. There be some letters we found lying alongside of 'un," and the labourer motioned to his assistant, who, pulling his forelock and approach-

ing with a sheepish grin, thrust an open packet into Lord Rotherhame's hand.

At the same moment Ralph, revived by the brandy which Wentworth had poured down his throat, made an effort to rise, solicitously repressed by the watchful butler.

"Let him sit up if he pleases," said Lord Rotherhame, peremptorily. "I hope you will soon be able to tell me your own story," he added, turning to Ralph, with a sinister look. "I shall be naturally eager to learn all particulars, and you see I have your possessions safe," and he mockingly held the damp packet of letters before his son's eyes.

"Lord Berkeley is better now," he added, turning to the men, after a moment's pause. "Take these good people to the kitchen, Wentworth, and give them supper. I am much obliged to you all for your trouble, which I will not forget."

Wentworth unwillingly obeyed, and the four men, again pulling their forelocks, followed the butler from the room, carefully, as if treading on eggs. The door closed behind them, and Lord Rotherhame, by some unaccountable impulse, rose and locked it!

Ralph was left alone in the dimly-lighted room with the father he had injured, and, as with an effort he struggled to shake off the stupor of exhaustion, a strange sensation of fear, half physical, half mental, crept over him. He leaned his head upon his hand, and remained mutely regarding his father—

There was a long silence; Ralph's eyes never wandered—he seemed spell-bound, as some helpless hare by the cold and fatal gaze of a rattle-snake. All the words that were ever spoken could not have said what that long, long look conveyed. Father and son remained thus for a full minute, gazing on each other with bated breath, until at last, convulsed by a spasm of rage, Lord Rotherhame sprang forward with uplifted hand.

“Father, father, do not strike me!” and as Ralph strove to move aside and avoid the threatened blow, Lord Rotherhame saw something that checked his passion, and made his clenched fist fall powerless by his side; a bright red stream was oozing from his son's pale lips, and staining the cushions and the floor. “Father, do help me!” he murmured indistinctly, and looked up with appealing, startled eyes.

The irrepressible filial instinct had asserted itself. It was one of those supreme moments on which, as on the balance of a scale, the destinies of a lifetime hang, and that child-like appeal for help went like an arrow to the father's heart, piercing the thick crust of hatred and resentment, to the quick, where paternal love yet lingered. He knelt down by the couch, encircled the slight boyish frame with one strong arm, and with the hand that a moment before had been raised to strike, poured cold water on the burning temples. Ralph's heart beat loudly close to

his own, he felt the pressure of the dark curling head upon his shoulder, and in that moment he remembered nothing of the offences he had deemed unpardonable—nothing but that his own child lay bleeding, perhaps to death, within his arms. Ralph believed he was about to die. With the natural instinct of humanity, he clung to life. Death, which at a distance had lured him with a wondrous fascination as the one true cure for that heartache which seemed beyond the reach of earthly medicine, scared him when it came thus close, and grinning, stared him in the face. He struggled wildly to raise himself, and again, though half-choked, essayed to speak.

“Stop it, stop it! can’t you see that it will kill me?” he cried, and there was a querulous agony in his tone which wrung his father’s heart.

“Keep absolutely quiet; do not attempt to move,” he answered. “Ralph, you used to trust me. Obey me this once, and I will save you.” And, laying his burden gently back on the cushions, he rushed to the bell and rang a peal which in a moment brought the butler flying from the supper-table.

“Call Mr. Daubeney and Parsons, send to the ice-house, and let one of the grooms ride the fastest horse in the stables to St. Dunstan’s for the doctor,” exclaimed Lord Rotherhame. “Why don’t you go?” he added, with an imperious stamp of the foot,

which effectually diverted Wentworth from his open-mouthed contemplation of the returned prodigal upon the sofa.

Ralph was now losing consciousness, and although the chaplain and valet, who had hurried to the spot, did their utmost, and the ice applied to his neck and forehead at last stopped the fatal bleeding, he only recovered from one fainting-fit to fall into another, and for an hour swooned almost continuously. When at last he came to himself, he looked up wonderingly at the pitying familiar faces that bent over him, as if uncertain where he was. Then the circumstances under which he had come home flashed back upon his memory, and, catching sight of his father, who stood passively at the foot of the sofa, a shudder of agony convulsed him, and he stretched out his hand to Mr. Daubeney as if for protection.

"Stay near me!" he whispered wildly; "he will kill me if I am left alone with him!"

Daubeney, startled by the horror in his face and tone, looked up with involuntary anger at Lord Rotherhame; and even Parsons, in whose mind there was some occult connection between Lord Berkeley's attack of hemorrhage and his father's displeasure, pursed up his lips with an air of pained disapprobation.

"He is raving!" said Lord Rotherhame, stung by the unspoken reproaches of his

chaplain and valet. "Recollect yourself, Berkeley," he added, a little coldly, for in his mind also the bitter memories of the past had begun to reassert themselves, and to contend with the natural emotions of anxiety for his son's threatened life. "You are at home and in your father's charge. There is no occasion to be nervous. Do not encourage his fancied terrors, Daubeny."

"I cannot explain myself!" exclaimed Ralph, who was half delirious. "I cannot answer your questions, I am too ill. Tell him he *must* wait," and again he clung desperately to Daubeny's hand.

"You had better go," whispered Daubeny, with authority, "your presence excites him, and the all-important thing at present is to keep him free from agitation."

Lord Rotherhame felt the justice of this advice, and the furtive, fearful glances of his son, as he grasped the chaplain's arm, warned him not to linger. He turned and left the room in silence.

It was half-past eleven, an hour by which the inmates of the Castle had usually retired to rest. To-night, however, the whole household seemed astir, and no one thought of bed. The news that the vanished heir of Rotherhame had been brought back, sick perhaps dying, to his father's house, had spread like wild-fire, and groups of servants gathered together here and there, whispering surmises and gleaming scraps of intelligenc

from Parsons, as from time to time he emerged from the library to issue directions, or to send for some restorative. Others hung about the kitchen doors, to bestow what information they could on those gossips who had come to head-quarters for fresh proofs of the startling rumours which were already rife in the village, and others stole out in pairs towards the drawbridge, listening for the first sound which should announce the doctor's advent.

Meanwhile Lord Rotherhame betook himself to the dismal unfurnished room, to which he had consigned his captive of the previous night.

Josceline rose as his jailer entered, leaving empty the solitary chair. Lord Rotherhame took it, and Josceline stood before him with downcast eyes, shamefaced and confused. Lord Rotherhame broke the constrained silence in a grave, low voice.

"Murray-Carr, I have brought myself to see you at last. When our interview is over, you will be free to go where you please. A few words I must say, and I need never trouble you again. Will you have the goodness, if you do not intend to answer my questions truthfully, to tell me so at once, and thus at all events spare me the inconvenience of any fresh deception."

"Truthfully!" muttered Josceline; "it is not my habit, Lord Rotherhame, to tell lies, that I am aware of."

"Pardon me," answered Lord Rotherhame coldly, "but after the discovery of last night I can scarcely feel warranted in appealing to your honour. To act as a spy, to pry into and betray the secrets of one whose bread you had eaten, and from whom you had received nothing but kindness, was an action wholly unworthy of a gentleman. You need not trouble to defend yourself. No alleged motives could in any degree modify my opinion of your conduct, and grieved as I am to lose the friendship of one whom I have always liked and cared for, it is not possible after what has happened that you and I should wish to meet again."

Josceline, who had flushed scarlet at the cutting words, so stern in their quiet intensity, now began to speak hurriedly before Lord Rotherhame could continue.

"But I must defend myself!" he exclaimed, and then his voice failed as the thought arose, that to vindicate himself would be to damn Ralph yet more deeply in his father's eyes.

Lord Rotherhame paused for him to proceed, and then, smiling coldly at his embarrassment, rose as if to say his own say with the utmost brevity. But Josceline interrupted him.

"What news of Berkeley?" he asked eagerly. "I must hear what has become of him before I leave this place."

"He was found and brought home to-

night. Further you need not concern yourself, as he is now in my charge."

Josceline turned cold with apprehension.

"But I *must* concern myself about him," he answered excitedly. "Oh, Lord Rotherhame, don't be hard on him! You have no notion how critical his state is. I have just nursed him through a dangerous illness—brain fever—and I don't believe he would have much chance if there were any return of it. Even you, if you knew all he had gone through before he could bring himself to do what he has done, would admit that he has already more than paid the penalty."

"And do *you* plead his cause with me?" asked Lord Rotherhame, in a tone of distant thunder; "you, who have aided and abetted him in his most base, unnatural crime!"

"I am most awfully sorry and ashamed that you should think I have acted ungratefully," answered Josceline with vehemence. "I wish to heaven we had left the whole thing alone! But his one mania, night and day, was to restore the child's rights. In his delirium he raved about it, and when he began to recover, he thought and harped upon the same theme eternally. Even in his sleep, I often heard him talking in broken, unintelligible sentences about the curse upon his family, and how God had charged him with the responsibility of removing it. I used to reason and expostulate with him by the hour, and all to no purpose; this one idea seemed

to have got possession of him, and to leave him no peace sleeping or waking. One thing, too, you ought to understand. He had promised you to hold his tongue on the subject, and he would never have told me a word if I had not found it all out for myself when he was delirious. When I found what he had on his mind, I took care not to leave him alone with any one, even the doctor, till he had come back to his right senses. As soon as he was able to bear the discussion of it, I told him what I had gathered from his ravings, and promised to keep it an inviolable secret, and then we settled on this plan together. But it was to satisfy his conscience, Lord Rotherhame—no through spite or heartlessness—for though he may have been afraid of you, he never ceased to love you, I know, nor I either; you must believe that, for it is as true as Gospel.”

“And have you really come to this?” asked Lord Rotherhame, with curling lip and kindling eye, “that you can profess to feel affection for the man whom you believe stained with the blood of an innocent kinsman?”

Josceline fixed his eyes on the floor, and clasped his hands uneasily.

“Were I the monster you think me,” continued Lord Rotherhame slowly, “I should not stand here and look you in the face; I should shrink away, and hide my foul hands and heart in the darkness of the grave. I

would kill myself rather than live on upon God's earth after having destroyed one of His fair and sacred temples. But I am not in that position ; I would once have refused to believe that it ever could be necessary to vindicate myself from such a crime to *you*, but it is after all little wonder, since my own son can believe me a murderer ! As you already know so much, however, know this also : Though appearances are against me, I am guiltless of my uncle's blood. I have committed crimes, but the butcher's trade has not been mine ! ”

He grew paler as he spoke, and large drops stood out upon his brow.

Josceline dared make no rejoinder. To have expressed the enormous relief he felt at the quiet, sincere words which removed from his mind the black suspicion against whose insidious persistence he had tried in vain to steel himself, would have sounded like an insult. But Lord Rotherhame, to whom it was unendurable that his young guest, for whom he had always felt a peculiar tenderness, should believe him guilty of a revolting crime, forced him to answer.

“ Do you believe what I have told you ? ”
he asked with sternness.

“ I do, I do ! ” he answered, the tears springing to his eyes. “ God forgive me and Ralph that we ever doubted you ! But he was torn to pieces, almost mad. His faith in God and man seemed shaken,

and he once told me that the creed he felt most inclined to accept was, 'I believe in the Devil, the lord and giver of death !' "

"I don't know why he should have burdened himself with the responsibility of my actions," said Lord Rotherhame, in a suppressed tone.

"The wonderful and unlooked for succession of events by which this mystery was gradually unfolded to him," said Josceline, with a faint return to his usual grandiloquence, "he took as a sign that Providence had chosen him as an instrument to do justice. Then one night he dreamed that his mother came gliding in, looking white and lovely like the moonlight, and that she laid a cold hand on him and told him that she had come from the Garden of Souls to bid him save you from sin. I hope you will forgive my speaking of her," he continued deprecatingly. "Ralph waked me directly and told me of his dream, and after that all his misgivings seemed to vanish. We planned our expedition and set out two days later, disguised, to make our attempt. We reached Rotherhame yesterday—Monday morning, early."

Lord Rotherhame sat with closed eyes, leaning his head upon his hand. At last he broke silence.

"Berkeley will have now to bear the distress of witnessing the complete demolition of his hopes. It must be disappointing to

you both to find that after all the risks you have run, the pains and ingenuity you have employed, you are further than ever from the attainment of your end. And yet to most sons it would be a relief that an attempt had failed which, if successful, would have entailed beggary, disgrace, imprisonment, even worse on him—”

He paused, unable to conclude his sentence, and covered his eyes with his hand.

“But you can’t think,” burst in Josceline earnestly, “that he would ever have done anything that could endanger you, or that I would have helped him had he wished to do so. On my soul, our idea was simply to get possession of the papers, lest you should destroy them and put it out of Ralph’s power to give them up when his time came.”

“Then my boy did not wish to ruin me?” said Lord Rotherhame after a moment’s silence, in a voice strangely altered, and almost shaking. “I treated him badly, Josceline, and I thought he hated, despised, and longed to revenge himself upon me.”

“How little you know Ralph!” answered Josceline.

“And tell me,” said Lord Rotherhame, “what do you suppose was my motive in keeping my uncle’s murderer hidden where you found him in the vaults?”

Josceline reflected a moment.

“That I cannot guess,” he replied, “but I

am satisfied that you had some good reason. I love you, Lord Rotherhame," he went on with sudden emotion, "and I will never rest till I have your forgiveness for myself and Ralph. Only consider how terrible it is to have a load upon one's conscience which one cannot shake off, and which weighs upon one like a nightmare ! If you would think of him as he used to be in the good old days when he worshipped the ground you trod on, and was never happy out of your sight ! For the sake of those days be generous, and allow him credit for having satisfied the demands of honour at an almost incalculable cost."

"You are a true friend, and I shall not forget what you have said," and Lord Rotherhame turned to the door quickly, as if he could bear no more. "Good-bye now Shake hands, if you will, as a pledge of parting kindness. Do not fear that I shall be harsh to Ralph ; you have made me feel more gently towards him than I have since first we quarrelled."

"And do you mean to stick to what you said ? Is this really to be our last meeting ?" said Josceline tremulously, taking his host's offered hand.

"It is best so !" said Lord Rotherhame sadly ; "but everything seems ready to shift and change, my boy, and I will not attempt positively to forecast the future. Some day, perhaps, when old wounds have healed over,

you and I may meet again. Once more, good-bye!"

A moment, and the door had closed upon him, and Josceline, in bitter grief at the sundering of the ties which bound him to his fondly loved friends, forgot his budding manhood, and shed quick and scalding tears.

Lord Rotherhame met the doctor coming out of the library, escorted by Parsons, and gently rubbing his hands together after the custom of his craft. They both looked serious and concerned.

"How is my son?" he asked, and his tone had in it a ring almost of entreaty.

Dr. Pyke shook his head. He was a tall, stout man, with a large expanse of white waistcoat, on which a gold watch chain shone conspicuously.

"To speak candidly, my Lord, it will be a critical case. He has evidently only just recovered from a sharp illness, which has enfeebled all the vital organs, and excitement and severe chill have brought on this hemorrhage, which I find to be from the left lung. What, however, causes me most immediate apprehension is, lest the long exposure, lying on the wet grass, should induce rheumatic fever. Every effort must be made to avert such a drain on life as that would be."

"What made him lie there? Had he fallen? Had he fainted?"

"The ankle is injured, but just now we

can obtain no information from him as to how that happened. Our chief endeavour must be to ward off fever, by keeping the body and mind soothed and tranquil. At present he is naturally suffering extreme exhaustion from the loss of blood."

"Do not leave him!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, hoarsely. "Do your utmost for him, Doctor. Save his life, and I will never forget the service!"

"All that medical care can do shall be done, rely on that. I have only left my patient now that I might make my report to you. Are you coming in?" and the Doctor held open the library door.

Lord Rotherhame shook his head, and then, moved by an uncontrollable impulse, drew nearer, and looked over the doctor's shoulder. Ralph was lying on the sofa as he had left him, but his cheeks, so white just now, had flushed a deep, dark red, and his wide open eyes burned with a terrible brightness. His dark hair was pushed back and saturated with wet, and Mr. Daubeny, kneeling by his side, was bathing his parched brow with vinegar. The faint, sharp scent struck the father's senses like a blow.

"May not the hemorrhage have relieved the brain?" he whispered desperately. "I seems quite conscious now."

"As sensible as you or I, but I can't say how long that may last. His weakness is great, and by the trouble on his face,

ns to have something on his mind. sibly—ahem—excuse me!—there may e been little differences, and a few kind ds from your Lordship might help to calm . Sometimes in these cases everything is on a point of that kind,” and the tor coughed significantly.

ord Rotherhame made no reply. Dr. e, beginning to apologise for his presumption, and to justify it on the ground of mastering solicitude for his patient, ed his head. His companion was already e.



CHAPTER XII.

The power of the Night, the press of the Storm, the presence of the
the Foe.

ROBERT BROWNING

Come flame, come torture for my sins !
Or mercy ope the golden portal.

WALTER THORN

THE pale midnight moon streamed on through the painted windows of the chapel, and lay quivering on its ancient pavement. A faint fragrance from the lilies beneath the Cross upon the Altar filled the air with mystic sweetness, and a beam falling on a picture of the Virgin, enlivened the large eyes, and calm fair face with an unearthly halo. The west end was shrouded in gloom. Stalls and organ loomed black through the darkness, and an air through the partially open door stirred the torn banners which streamed from the roof into a slow and ghostly motion. Before the Altar a man, his forehead on the cold stones, his spirit wrestling with the strong, unseen Angel of God. He had come hither to settle out in his own soul the eternal quarrel between Right and Wrong, and the issue of the battle he could not forecast. The life of God within, the Will of the Unseen Father, cannot be crushed out, or beaten under by any single act of will, however con-

trated. The soul of this man, after long conflict, had deliberately laid down its arms at Satan's feet. With Eternity before it, it had calmly, slowly, absolutely, though with profoundest sadness, chosen Time. Pride had triumphed over obedience, self over God.

And in the misery of that deepest degradation, the yielding of freedom and eternal progress to the corrupting bondage of Evil, the captive spirit had found a kind of peace; that peace of exhaustion which comes when fight is abandoned, and nought remains but to lie still and wait for Death. On a sudden all was changed. The Divine spark within him burned up clear and free, as though he had never tried to bury it beneath smothering dust and ashes; the chained will shook its fetters; the combat that had seemed to die, renewed itself more fiercely. Never before had a struggle so desperate raged within him, as this that now laid his body prostrate on the stones—for his late submission to the Tempter had weakened his will, and rendered more overwhelming the odds against him. Hemmed in, as it were, between fire and ocean, torture and despair, the old agony of choice was forced once more upon him with imperious and instant urgency. On either hand the encroaching elements pressed upon his path, stealing each moment from its narrowing limit, and leaving him less foothold. The hour for action had struck! This new tor-

ment of indecision warned him that even the cruel calm of despair could be purchased by deeds alone—that did he wish his God to cease from him, and to let him alone, that he might take comfort in lying quietly at the Devil's feet, he must no longer merely resolve on, but actually consummate his final breach with Heaven. Goaded thus to immediate action, he yet shrank back appalled. The tossing of Chaos sounded in his ears, the hurly of that wild Sea which obeys no Law and owns no God. Pausing on the brink, the Past came back upon him with something of its old power; the Past, when high hope and noble aspirations had filled his life with splendour. The spells of early love again allured him; voices called to him from a far-off land, where all was good; wife and first-born, the idols before whom he had long knelt, with a worship too supreme for any but their Maker, resumed their ancient sway over his heart. In his desperation he recognised that from the general wreck, one treasure might yet be saved; that, in return for his tardy submission to its laws, he might demand of Heaven his child's threatened life. His child! for whom love, long changed to gall, now cried out again with a craving thirst. His child! the pledge and seal of an ineffably sacred union, the most precious legacy of his precious dead. By what mysterious law did these claims, which he believed strangled, revive at this moment,

When to yield to them must imply treachery to later vows? He could not pause to ponder this problem. Enough that they *had* revived! Enough, that at any cost, to do their bidding might arrest the vengeful purpose menacing his son. It should be a barter with the Almighty! He would confess all, relinquishing to its last ounce his stolen gold, face exposure and imprisonment, bring dishonour on his guilty mother's name; worse than all! tear out and leave to bleed on life's dusty highway the heart that trusted in him, - and this sacrifice should be repaid in kind! Ralph should live! Live! and be loved and happy! Would no voice answer him? No sign be given to show that the Great Ruler of Mankind had accepted the bargain? And then in the dead silence that mocked his suspense, the spirit of angry scorn awoke. Did Heaven think to intimidate him into becoming the machine to work out his own ruin—into lying tamely down in the dust of degradation, where men would tread him under foot—that in the end perchance it might cheat him of his payment? No! unless for certain results, the price was too great to pay! Before his mental vision rose all the small, debasing details of the criminal's detection; policemen, handcuffs, scourging tongues, staring, gloating eyes! He saw himself standing in the Court of Justice, a prominent, solitary figure, exposed to glut the public curiosity! the air foul and

heavy; the swarming populace eating and gaping; his acquaintances standing coldly by, the secrets of his life unlocked and dragged to light by the hired tongues of unpitied strangers; the long, long hours, rendered immeasurable by their breadth of agony; dismay, such as a hunted animal might feel when trapped and caught at last; the stern voice of the Judge, dooming him, it might be at the bidding of a plebeian prejudiced jury, to a death of shame, or coldly consigning him to herd for life with brutal felons. All the instincts of a gentleman, the refined sensitiveness of habit and education, the passion for the romantic and the beautiful that had been born in him, the repugnance of a father to be degraded in his children's eyes, man's natural clinging to happiness, his inherent dread of suffering, surged up at once within his tortured heart, and made him shrink in agony from the stern path of duty. And why should he voluntarily bear another's meed of shame and punishment? Had he devised his cousin's murder, or borne lot or part in the crime for which he was called upon to suffer? Had he not concealed it for his mother's sake, and at her last command? What, after all, had Ralph been to him, that he should ransom his life by this tremendous sacrifice? Had not he defied, insulted, suspected, almost sold him? And, as though conjured up by some malevolent spell, the bitter moment returned upon

him when he had lain upon the ground beneath his son's foot, taking in silence his impious blow. "Heaven and Earth!" he cried aloud, and his voice startled him, it was so unlike his own, "was it for *him* I would have played the abject? I will put an end to this idiotcy for ever!" He sprang to his feet, and seizing, with trembling hands, the fatal documents which he had laid beside him on the stones, turned to go, that the House of God might not be desecrated by his crime.

But as he turned, a sudden vision arrested him. His eye fell on the fair, illumined face of the Sainted Mother of God, and he paused as if spell-bound, and stood motionless. Pale, pure, untouched by the tumult of earthly passion—her stainless loveliness rose upon his storm-tossed soul, like the mild moon upon a raging sea. Upon her virgin breast lay the Child of the Eternal, reposing peacefully within the frail girl-arms, guarded by the inviolable sanctity of maternal love. Did love like that surround his erring boy with holy, viewless guard? Were shadowy arms about his neck, as he lay burdened and broken-hearted upon his couch of sickness? Did sweet dead eyes look, from above his head, reproach upon the trusted husband to whose care the mother had, dying, confided her orphan boy—the boy whose innocent soul had been brought to share in the penalty of his father's sin? Christ and His Mother speak still to the hearts of their brother men,

"I am a poor man
and I have been before
you many times—fifty su-
perior court sessions to the
best of my knowledge premon-
itioned me that he would
come here and make his
case known at his
place of business and she
said that her heart
was broken by the blast
of the gun which he shot
at her and of himself
she said it was a
very bad one and she
said that she had
never which made in
the hands of Weaver's hand
and of him. There was
no more."

joy, that symbol of shame which points to glory! He saw it, and like a drowning man threw himself upon that Rock. All at once the turmoil ceased; he knew that he was safe! And kneeling there upon the cold stones, with no thrill of triumph, but with a strange, mysterious sense of peace, Kenelm Harold yielded his submission up to God.

"And it shall come to pass that before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."

* * * * *

"Ralph, are you awake? Can you hear me? Lie still, my boy, I am come to tell you that I will do all you wish. Your efforts shall not have been in vain! I have come to see with you that God's will must be done at any cost. Only live, my child! live for your father's sake! After all it was much for your sake that he sinned."

There was a strange pathos in the father's voice, as in the hushed and dimly lighted room he hung over his maimed and helpless son. Ralph raised his half-closed eyes, and a light shone suddenly and solemnly within them, as if their dark depths reflected a gleam from some passing angel's wing. Then he turned away his face and wept.

"Forgive me, Ralph," and the father touched his hot hand with a yet more burning kiss. "And now, sleep if you can; you will wake to find your burden gone! Sleep! my poor tired boy."

CHAPTER XIII.

Facilis descensus Averni.

VIRGIL.

"Now, my son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel."
JOSHUA VII, 19.

IN the cold, dim light of early morning, Archdeacon Egerton sat in the small study which had been appropriated to his use, reading for a second time a lengthy letter, which half-an-hour before had been brought to him by Lord Rotherhame's valet.


Last night's wind had blown up clouds, and chill showers were falling steadily. The foliage of the great trees on the bowling-green hung damp and discoloured, and the flowers bowed their depressed heads almost till they touched the wet earth. There was a fierce light this morning in the Archdeacon's kindly eyes, and as he perused the paper in his hand, he involuntarily clenched his fist. The opening sentences had stated, with a certain proud humility, that having resolved on confessing an offence he had committed against the laws of the land and the dictates of honour, Lord Rotherhame would make his first acknowledgment, as in duty bound, to Archdeacon Egerton. He desired to place in his hands an exact account of his crime, and the circumstances which

ed to its committal. He would not ask
veness, nor plead in his own defence,
xious that he neither merited the one
was in a position to do the other.

I have deceived your daughter and your-
in common with all the rest of the
l," ran the letter. "I am not Earl of
erhame, and the possessions and lands I
been calling mine, are the property of
er. Their rightful owner is a girl of
years old, who has been given out to be
grand-daughter of Nancy Weedon, my
-mother, and has been brought up on
ty. Into her hands I am about to resign
eerage and estates which the world has
ved to be mine. But I must ask your
arance while I explain, as briefly as may
ow all this has come about.

ly grandfather had five children, three
and two daughters. The youngest
born to him by a second marriage
a person of low birth, was a wilful,
nageable boy, cared more for his
er and her relations than for his
family, and would have been a great
happier if he had been born in the
n from which she came. He got on
ably at home, and at last, as I have been
had a violent dispute with his sister
mother), in which he behaved so dis-
fully, that his father refused even to see

One night he disappeared from home;
olice were set upon his track, but before



they could get hold of him, he had started from Southampton, as cabin boy on a ship bound for the Cape. His father sent his agent in pursuit by the next mail, but while he was on the seas, news reached England of a tremendous hurricane on the Atlantic. In that storm, the 'Triumph' must have gone to the bottom, for she never reached the Cape, and not one of her crew gained land to break the awful silence in which her fate was shrouded. Years rolled by; Simon Harold was numbered with the dead, and a monument was raised to his memory in our parish church. The death of his father, and of his two elder brothers, left my mother heir to the family title and property, and she took possession, without a shade of suspicion upon her mind that the person lived who could challenge her rights. So things went smoothly for nearly forty years, and the name and story of the ill-fated boy had been almost forgotten, when one windy autumn evening, five years ago, he re-appeared to disturb our peace. None of the village people knew him; they did not recognise the blood of their lords in the shabby American demagogue, who hobnobbed with them in the public-house, talking tap-room politics, and stirring them up to hate all whom fortune had favoured above themselves. The only person to whom he revealed himself was my mother. They had always hated each other with a mortal hatred, and he took

no pains to conceal from her that his return to claim dignities, which he professed to scorn, was due mainly to his burning desire to humiliate and harass her.

“My mother neither feared God, nor regarded man. The devil was at her ear, and whispered to her to destroy him. She simulated a half-repentant kindness; she wormed from him the fact that, except for one solitary confidant, she was the only person who so far knew his secret; she induced him to grant her a fortnight’s respite in which to consider whether she should yield without litigation to his claims. Taking for her accomplice an old servant of Satan, who had been for years in her household, and who, she knew well, would sell his soul for gold, she agreed with him that for a certain large reward, he should rid her of her enemy. What followed you well know. Tibbetts was one of those whose natural vocation is to kill. He had in his youth been an inveterate torturer of animals, and had once become a butcher from an innate love of the slaughter-house. For some days he dogged my uncle’s steps, and at last one night found his opportunity. There was a desperate conflict; one of those fierce hand-to-hand struggles in which the man is lost in the wild beast, and the strongest satisfies its strength by killing. In the madness of the moment he forgot that there had been a witness to his deed; or my uncle’s little child, hiding in terror among the tall bracken,

might have shared her father's fate. When he had left her, her cries summoned to the spot some of the men who had been drinking that evening with her father in the tavern. More than one of them had heard Tibbetts offer to guide Simon Marley to St. Dunstan's, and when they had heard her story, and had discovered the body in the pond, they set off instantly to his house to seize him. When they reached it he was gone, but the ravings of his wife, whose reason the shock of his appearance had upset, confirmed their suspicions. The police were sent for, and a general search was instituted.

"Tibbetts skulked about that night in the forest, but towards the morning he stole out and attempted to make his escape across unfrequented wilds of heath towards a railway tunnel three miles distant. He was observed as you know, and they pursued him. In his panic he must have lost all head; he went round in a circle, and at last slunk into the church at Rotherhame. I had been there praying—I could pray in those days—and I return Heaven wove this web of death about my guiltless feet. Tibbetts saw me kneeling and rushed to me. His eyes were starting from his head; there was foam on his lips 'Keep them off!' he panted. 'Hide me or I'll have your mother's neck wrung too!'

"I have now come to my first appearance in this wretched history. Till that day—you may believe me, for to speak at last the

exact, literal, cruel truth, I am giving up love, freedom, honour, hope—all that man holds dear—I knew nothing of my uncle's reappearance, nor of my mother's design. But that Christmas morning, sick with fear at the imminent peril of discovery, she had taken me into her confidence, adjured me to strain every nerve to further the escape of Tibbetts, and made me a sharer in the burden of her guilt. And now, to explain the mode of his escape, I must again break my story's thread.

"As a child I had been told that there was in our family a certain secret, handed down from father to son, and which, in accordance with the will of an ancestor, was to be known to the head of our family and his heir alone. This secret, in accordance with family tradition, was imparted to me on the day I attained my majority. Hear it now, for I, and all my private affairs, must soon be food for public entertainment, and it would be the emptiest of farces for one who is about to become a mere chattel of the State to affect an air of reserve or mystery. An ancestor of ours had, in the reign of James the First, secretly restored an old subterranean tube, connecting our burial-vault with the oldest part of the Castle—three very ancient dungeons, which had then been for a long period bricked up and almost forgotten, and which dated from Saxon times. By the aid of a skilful mechanic, in his confidence, he contrived a

secret spring by which entrance could be effected into the subway at either end. A zealous Catholic, he meant this place to be used for the safe hiding in case of need of such of his co-religionists as were engaged in conspiracies for the overthrow of the Government, and the restoration of the Roman Obedience. But I have my own tale to tell, and must not linger over my ancestor's doings.

"Thanks to the knowledge I possessed, I had it in my power to save my mother's honour, and though she had never won nor cared to win my heart, I felt then, as I feel now, that I would face any personal evil to shield her from disgrace. I turned the key in the church-door, dragged Tibbetts behind the rood-screen, and fate so favoured me that I was able to hide myself with him within the burial-vault, before his pursuers, fierce and eager, burst into the church above our heads. We heard their steps, and frantic, baffled exclamations, as they hunted hither and thither for their vanished prey, but we were safe—among the dead. A living death began then for this man who had fled from the gallows. I guided him to the dungeons below the Castle, and as he had in his confusion and terror observed nothing of our mode of entrance, egress from the trap into which he had blindly rushed, was impossible to him. The police were utterly at fault, and no detective was able to discover a clue.

"My mother and I held a consultation, and we agreed that we could not at all events venture to give the man his liberty till the hue and cry had a little subsided. In our hands accordingly we kept him—the only sharer of our secret being my dear foster-mother, Mrs. Weedon, who would rather have died than betray us, but who now desires me to include her in the confession I am making. For the first few months I was forced to feed and visit Tibbetts myself, fearing to devolve such a charge upon a woman, lest seized by a sudden craving for liberty, he should compel her by force to release him. We were in difficulties as to what arrangements we could make when I was obliged to be away from home.

"A creeping paralysis solved our dilemma, and by the time that Tibbetts, who had at first acquiesced willingly in his confinement, began to sicken of darkness and solitude, he was physically unable to make any effort to escape—changed from a thick-set, powerful man, into a palsied, distorted cripple. My mother had the room, in which was the secret entrance to the dungeons, fitted up as a sitting-room for herself, and gave the charge of it to Mrs. Weedon. Meanwhile, though Tibbetts threatened, cajoled, and entreated us by turns to give him his liberty, we became daily more afraid to run the risk. My mother felt that she could never know one moment's peace if the partner of her guilt were abroad.

and at any moment liable to be discovered. Her horror of exposure amounted almost to phrenzy, and so worked upon her mind, that before long she sickened of brain-fever, and died in convulsions. In her last hour she called me to her side, and commanded me under pain of her curse, to continue to shield her name from infamy. And so she left me bound; and my perjured silence assumed to me almost the aspect of a religious duty. 'He shall visit the sins of the father upon the children.' How, when I remember my own fate, and look upon my guiltless children, do these heavy words fall upon my heart like clods upon a coffin-lid!

"After her death, at which my foster-mother and I were the only assistants, Mrs. Weedon showed me a sealed paper, written by my mother during the previous month, and witnessed by herself and Miss Teskey, her companion—the latter, of course, being ignorant of its contents. This contained a full and minute confession of her crime, which was to be concealed in her coffin, and only to be taken thence should it ever become necessary to clear me from suspicion of implication in the murder. Her instructions were obeyed, and as both the witnesses to the deed are still living, I suppose I may be able to bring a Court of Law to believe that the document is authentic, and no forgery of mine.

"My mother left me inheritor of her titles

and broad lands, as well as of her secret of guilt and shame. I hated Fate, which had entrapped me unawares into this sin, whose miserable consequences were like a millstone round my neck, dragging me down to a bottomless abyss. Many a time I have felt almost driven by the scourge of conscience to brave my mother's curse, and by confession to rid myself of the anguish I had to bear in silence. But the scarecrow of a prison, where men lose their human rights and become machines and slaves, daunted me. Could I have braved it for myself, I could not for her, my innocent wife. I knew it must break her heart, and she was my idol, wearing on her face and soul all the sweet hues of heaven, and stealing away my worship from the Great Creator to herself, His loveliest work. I persuaded myself that the Righteous Judge, Who requires mercy and not sacrifice, would never exact from me a deed which, just in law, would outrage natural equity by steeping her guileless soul in agony, to bestow worldly advancement on an ignorant, babbling baby. So clinging to this belief, and salving scruples by perpetual almsgiving, I obtained periods of peace, during which conscience let me alone to enjoy a delirium of rapture with her whom I loved as my saint, my life, my all. But Heaven, less pitiful than I had hoped, struck her down before my eyes. I lost my wife, and with her all faith, all joy, all belief in Divine

and human goodness. I was left alone in the darkness of despair. God only knows the ages of hell-pain concentrated in those first months of widowhood. But pride remained to me, and by its aid I learnt ere long to curb my misery, to wear a calm face, to hide the death-wound in my soul, to move again among my fellow-men—the shadow and the phantom of a man among beings of flesh and blood, whose speech and thoughts I copied, and whose interests I made believe to share. They say that, in this life at all events, man is never wholly evil, and after the first months of desolation, during which I fled from all eyes that had seen me in my better days, I returned home, and the little faces of my motherless children awakened in me a sense of tenderness and pity. I resolved that they should not suffer because I was miserable. I gave up public life, in which I felt no longer fit to mingle, refused the Garter offered me by the Government of that day, which I knew myself unworthy to wear, and resolved to devote my life to my little ones, to give to them and to the poor what time could be spared from the necessity of solitude. Eager to be true in little things, although living a lie, I would not suffer my wife or mother to bear in death stolen titles, nor mock the grave with falsehood: and their monuments bear in consequence the simple names to which alone they have right. I would not, knowing myself no peer, vote in

Parliament; and except in London, where hospitality has no sacredness, and one is to one's guests a mere landlord, I shut myself out from the society which, had it known, would have proscribed me. But although at times, by the natural law of things, I had periods of comparative insensibility, I could not always carry out my resolution, nor bear towards my children the smiling face of sympathy. Suppressed irritation smoulders only to burst out into a fiercer flame at last. One thing I imagined was my right—not so much in virtue of the sacred tie between us, as because I had freely given to my son what remained to me of my wrecked and blasted heart—I looked for a corresponding devotion on his part, uncalculating, self-bestowing, reckless. I would have displeased God to serve him any day. What, I argued, had God done for me personally that I should put him before my child? and I expected that Ralph would mete me out a like unmeasured measure. I wish to omit no leading point in the catalogue of my offences, and I confess to you that when I found myself deceived, when I came upon the limits of his love and his obedience, my passion for him turned to hatred, and I made him bitterly to rue what, in my mad jealousy, I called his treachery.

“The inward ferocity engendered by concealed pain I vented on his head, and I now feel that I must, in a great measure, hold myself responsible if, worn out by mental

suffering, he sinks into an untimely grave. But before I come to speak of the share he has had in these transactions—a share which has witnessed to his deep love of honour, and to which Lady Rotherhame will owe the restoration of her rights—I must once more go back a little in my story. To keep suspicion asleep, my mother had given out that the murdered man was a certain Charles Weedon, son of our old nurse, who, having deserted from the army as a young man, had since, it was supposed, been hiding in one of our colonies. The public was informed that this young man had married well, and so far risen in the world, that, though he could not conquer his desire to revisit his mother, he had persuaded her to receive him secretly, and to communicate to no one that he was her child. The motive for his murder was alleged to be the mystery he foolishly made about the knapsack which contained his little valuables, and which, it was said, excited Tibbetts' cupidity. The combined testimony of Mrs. Weedon and my mother, both of whom were held to be above suspicion, settled at once the question of the victim's identity, and none of his wife's family—with the solitary exception of his brother-in-law, Henry Middleton—knowing anything of his origin, the verdict of the jury remained unchallenged. Our security was rendered greater by the fact that my uncle, with almost incredible shortsightedness, had not taken the precaution

to have any of his legal documents copied before he ventured himself in England, and when shortly after the murder a letter arrived for him from Henry Middleton, in which he regretted this want of foresight, urged his friend to lose no time in having duplicates made by some trustworthy English lawyer, and spoke of himself as 'the single friend to whom you have confided your momentous secret,' we felt that our position was well nigh impregnable. A long illness incapacitated Middleton from coming to England to throw the light of his knowledge on the mysterious case. His brain was affected, and he was, I believe, for some time in a *Maison de Santé*. It was not till six months ago that he was able to accomplish the voyage, and on his arrival he began by making vigorous, though secret, efforts to collect evidence. Finding his cause to be almost hopeless, he obtained an interview with me last July in London, and required me, in the name of justice and of God, to resign my stolen honours. His appeals moved me strangely, but to respond to them would have involved horrors which I was too cowardly to face, and when at last he assumed a tone of menace, I openly defied him. He then brought me face to face with Charles Weedon, whom he had discovered by advertisements, and bribed to appear against me. I was in the utmost peril, but I would not take my ruin from another's hand. I demanded a private conversation with Wee-

don, in which I succeeded in changing that most-to-be-dreaded enemy into a loyal friend. He secretly left the country, and Henry Middleton's last hope was gone.

"Lady Rotherhame has meanwhile been brought up as a child of the lower classes. My mother had, from the beginning, announced her intention to provide for the grand-daughter of her faithful servant, but the yearly sum paid for her maintenance was to avoid suspicion, modest—only sufficient to afford her an education at a small boarding-school. Her holidays were spent chiefly with her maternal grandmother in London, occasionally with her aunt and guardian, Mrs. Bradshaw.

"Till last Christmas, when, by my advice, in order to keep up her assumed character of grandmother, Mrs. Weedon invited her to stay with her, the little girl had never revisited the scene of her father's death. During the winter she got an attack of whooping-cough which prevented her returning to school, so that during our absence in London she remained with Mrs. Weedon, and might have been here now if I had not insisted on despatching her to a Girls' College in Edinburgh. It is said that it is impossible to forgive the person you have injured—at all events, the sight of this child's fair, plaintive face has been to me an eyesore of intolerable pain.

"To pass briefly to my son's part in this

fair, I need not pause to tell you in what manner he became possessed of the knowledge both of the secret entrance into the dungeons and of the existence of the murderer and the dead man's documents in my keeping. I was indeed well nigh overwhelmed when I discovered that his life also was to be haunted by the shadow of this ghastly nightmare, this familiar spirit of evil, which has so wearily clogged my steps. But at the time I was too bitterly angry with him to have energy for much compassion. The black injustice of his suspicions maddened me; I hated him when I found he was braver and more honourable than I, and that to some extent he had me in his power. But I will not dwell on this theme; some smarts are too recent to bear touching, and I desire not to galvanise back old life passions which, thank God, sleep at last. You already know enough to understand the cause of our mortal quarrel, which, in August last, drove my boy an outcast into the world. He has suffered—I know it well; I used to mark it in my most unpitying moments, and I mark it now in the old lines on his young brow, and the contraction of his eyes—he has suffered untold horrors. The conflict between duty and inclination, which once devastated my soul, has aged and wasted him, and where I weakly yielded, he, a young and simple boy, has conquered. Two nights ago, assisted by his friend, and against a mighty counter-tide of feeling and interest,

he came here to do all he could to save my uncle's law-papers from the destruction with which I had threatened them. He failed, but though on first detecting his design I could almost have killed him in my anger, One mightier than he or I has come between us. A mark, whether of Heaven or Death I know not, is on his brow, and he has become to me a sacred thing. But he must not die! Dare I not hope that God will hear my prayers; now that emptied of all, I come before Him in dust and ashes? that He will not visit my sins upon my child's gentle and stainless soul?

"My tale is told, the candles are getting low, and the cold grey light of morning—of a new life—is stealing in through the shutters. To-night, instead of sleeping, I have worked—the ink is still wet, and I see lying before me the self-forged instrument of my ruin. It is still within my power to undo the night's work, to come down just as usual in the morning, and to go my way in quiet and honour. But I must no more be the slave of my weakness—what I have purposed I will perform. I have watched with a certain artistic interest the gradual unfolding of this history; curious to see, for the first time, in black and white, and reduced to one compact whole, those things which have hitherto been unwritten save in blood, on the shrinking tablets of the heart.

"Of your daughter I dare hardly speak.

I have sinned against her, yet though my mind often misgave me that I ought never to have linked her fate with mine—accursed—there was a time when I hoped that, after all the miseries I had brought on others and on myself, God would allow me at least to make her happy. When I saw her—bright, imaginative, generous, beautiful—my withered heart seemed to expand once more, its frost-locked sap flowed again, and blossoms of long forgotten hope appeared. I knew myself unworthy of her, but love levels all disparities, and I read in her clear, truth-telling eyes that she loved me. When my son left me, for the first time the thought arose, that since her heart was already mine, it might be lawful for me to ask her hand, and begin a new life, the object of whose labour and whose devotion should be herself. I thought that with her to inspire and teach me I might become a better man, at least serve my race better than I had before. And yet, many a time since you brought her here, have I wished to heaven that I had let her be, or that I had never crossed her path; many a time, when stabbed by words and looks of blind, trusting, happy love, I have been on the verge of burning to ashes the fatal documents that might blast her peace. Had it not been for the subtle influence of her high thoughts, undermining, all unperceived by me, the strength and courage of inward wil, I might never have taken this step, nor

~~Her~~ ~~the~~ voice which bade me do the
~~and~~ ~~know~~ herself must be the bleeding
~~heart~~ ~~in~~ my sacrifice. And now the worst
~~is done~~ and she must learn I have deceived
~~her~~ For she shall not, cannot, grieve long.
Love ~~finds~~ a natural death when its object
~~proves~~ ~~un~~worthy! Her girlish passion will be
forgotten; the wounds of young hearts heal
quickly. To think otherwise would indeed
be a punishment greater than I could bear!

"In an hour's time I shall telegraph to
Mr. Middleton to come here, that I may yield
myself and all that I possess straightway
into his hands.

"KENELM HAROLD."

The Archdeacon crushed the paper in his
hand as he finished reading it, and then,
straightening it once more, cast his eyes a
third time over its contents. Then he laid
his head upon his hands and groaned. How
dared he go to his child, and tell her that the
man to whom she had given her faith and her
heart was a cheat, a liar, and a thief! He
trembled over-awed before the prospect of
meeting those unsuspecting, unconscious
eyes. But necessity gives strength—the
fatal meet death—the inevitable—
The Archdeacon knew that
must break the truth to Geraldine,
though he bitterly, "the sooner she
the serpent she has taken to her
and worshipped and believed in, the

sooner will her infatuation vanish. Thank God that we are not too late to save her from him! The scoundrel! to offer his polluted and stolen name to my sweet child!"

He walked boldly to the door, and went to Geraldine's room. He knocked, and her voice instantly bade him come in. She was up already, and sat in her white dressing gown before the window, writing. Without, gusts of wind were driving the fine rain across the Park, and the dim morning light was falling sadly on the new-born day.


Geraldine glanced round as her father entered, and lifted a glowing rosy cheek for him to kiss.

"Oh, papa!" she exclaimed, too much preoccupied to notice anything unusual in his look, "am I not a good girl to get up so early? I am writing to Gertrude; it is so impossible to find time in the day to tell her everything."

The Archdeacon turned sick; he had no heart to begin the speech he had prepared, and put off the evil day by murmuring something about the weather.

"Do you think it will be wet or dry?" she asked. "I grieve to think that our long spell of sunshine has broken at last, though I shall have enough to do ransacking the library, to fill a week of rain."

"I hope it may clear for our journey," said the Archdeacon, in a trembling voice.



The ice once broken, he grew bolder. "Geraldine, we are going home by the middle of the day train."

"Going home!" she exclaimed, and, suddenly turning, she saw the grave look upon his face. "Is anything the matter, father?" she asked, fearfully. "Have you had bad news from home?" Her father shook his head. "Lord Berkeley is worse," she cried, more falteringly, "or Kenelm—Papa, is he ill?"

"He is not ill," returned her father, who, like many well intentioned but misguided persons, thought that an inevitable blow is rendered more bearable if preceded by the additional torture of suspense. And, after a pause, he added: "My child, prepare yourself for what I am come to tell you. The man to whom you have given your heart is unworthy of you. He has deceived us all, and he has cheated an orphan child out of her rights. He is no more Lord Rotherhame than I am, but an impostor, spending another's wealth, and bearing a name to which he has no right."

"It is not true—you are laughing at me!" and, as she rose from her chair, a smile, scared and ghostly, hovered on her lips, while her eyes sought hungrily for some relaxation of her father's features.

"It is too true, my poor child. He has himself confessed his guilt to me. You must cast him out of your thoughts, as one utterly

unworthy of the respect and love of an upright heart."

Geraldine threw up her hands with a low, involuntary cry, and staggered back a pace. The Archdeacon put out his arm to support her, but she instantly recovered herself, and stood like a statue, erect and cold.

"It seems very terrible at first," said her father, "but day by day the pain will grow less, and in a little while you will come to thank God that this discovery was made in time to save you from being the wife of a *swindler*."

The word shook her from her apathy. She shivered and clasped her hands.

"You will come home with us to the many who love and care for you," he continued, "and by degrees will learn to be happy, as in the old days before this man disturbed your peace. I know you are a good, brave girl, and that you will try to be patient and cheerful for all our sakes."

"I will try," she answered mechanically.

"That is my own dear child," he said, kissing her cold forehead. "I will send a telegram to Gertrude to expect us; you will like to be with her again, wont you?"

She returned his kiss.

"I am rather tired; I think I should like to be alone a little," she answered, with a kind of moan.

Her father looked at her; she seemed whitened all over, like a person who has been

out in a snow-storm; and there was something in her face which warned him he had better leave her. He kissed her once more, whispered, "God help you, darling!" and, putting the fatal letter into her extended hand, quitted the room, half scared at the quietness with which she had taken her blow.

"She bears it so beautifully," said Miss Nutting to Dawson, as, an hour later, she stole into the dressing-room, and found the maid busy packing up her young lady's boxes. Nothing had been confided to her, but that circumstances had come to light which rendered it desirable that Geraldine's engagement should at once be broken off, and even this was carefully to be kept at present from the knowledge of the household. "I crept in on tip-toe a minute ago, and put my arms round her, and gave her a good hug, and she seemed quite calm, and asked me at what hour we were going."

Dawson shook her head.

"I had rather she should have a good cry, Miss; it would seem more natural," she replied. "I am afraid she takes it very hard, poor darling! Whatever can that there Lord Rotherhame be made of to have behaved so?" went on Dawson, with kindling eyes. "I am sure I always thought him as nice a gentleman as Miss Egerton could have, and one to make any young lady happy."

"I never quite took to him myself," said


Nina, sighing, "from the first day when I saw him at Dr. Bogle's. But dear Mrs. Egerton thought differently, and it is terrible to see how shocked and disappointed she is now. How thankful I ought to feel that Mr. Meules is so different!"

"Have you wished Mr. Meules good-bye, Miss?" asked Dawson.

"No, indeed," said Nina, mournfully. "They will be at matins now, but I think of running over to the village presently just to explain our sudden departure. It will be a shock to him, but you know," concluded Miss Nutting, shaking her head archly, "it won't be very long now, so we must not complain if we are sometimes disappointed of being together."

"Don't mention him to Miss Egerton, whatever you do," said Dawson, aggravated that at such a time as this Miss Nutting should bestow one thought upon herself. "It will set her thinking on his Lordship directly."

"Oh, no, of course," said Nina, fervently. "What a pity to think of all these nice new things wasted, as one might say, for to have such a variety would be useless to her now," and she glanced ruefully at the various pretty dresses and ribbons to which Mrs. Egerton had treated her daughter in honour of her first visit to her future home. There was a strange pathos in the look of these bits of girlish finery, emblems of a joy that had taken flight for ever.



A tap at the door interrupted the conversation, and a footman announced that the Archdeacon and Mrs. Egerton were taking breakfast in their private sitting-room, and hoped that Miss Egerton and Miss Nutting would join them there immediately.

"Miss Egerton is not here," said Dawson, peeping through a chink of the door into the empty bedroom. "Her hat is gone too," she added, venturing in, and glancing at the cupboard. "I hope she has not run out in all this rain!"

CHAPTER XIV.

Nessun maggior dolente
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria.

DANTE.

IF it be sad to view by morning light the scene of a midnight revel, and find its garlands withered, its lights burnt low, its gay guests gone; if it be sadder yet to stand beside a familiar form whence the animating soul is fled; then is it of all most sad, most strange, to gaze for the first time with blank amazement on a world swept bare of joy; a world whose splendour has faded into the deathly grey of a dull despair.

Alone, among the wet fir-trees, Geraldine was spending one brief hour face to face with her misery. One little hour of pause between the two great divisions of her life, ere she was borne away from the house that should have been her home, driven out like Eve from Eden, to wander through the world, shivering and forsaken. As a traveller who, attaining a mountain summit, lingers to look back on the heights he has scaled, and downward to the depths to which he must descend, she reviewed her past, and shrinkingly contemplated the future which stretched before her. Could she bear it—never to hear his voice again, or see his eyes, or feel his kiss?

—could she go forth into the bare, discoloured, dismal world, now that the spell, which had enchanted it into Paradise, had broken? wake morning by morning to a fresh day of pain, drag through the tedious hours, endure the ceaseless contact with others, hoping for nothing except those few hours of darkness when night should come and shut her off from curious eyes to cry and moan unnoticed? How long would they grant her to mourn, she wondered? When would the decent period of grief be over? When must she go back to the old life, resume the duties of eldest daughter of the house, entertain visitors, go to parties, talk and laugh? Had she but been his widow, she need have enacted a part in no such ghastly farce; she might have tended his grave, worn her weeds, and have been let alone; but, unwedded, the world denied her the right to grieve. And from the world's judgment there was no appeal. No one now to come between it and her, to take her in strong protecting arms, and bear her over rough places, and keep her feet from the thorns of life. Even her parents, tender and compassionate as they were, would not, beyond certain limits, countenance her sorrow; and, for very shame, she herself could not consent to darken the brightness of family intercourse, nor to sit, a spectre at the board, to sadden her young brothers and sisters by tear-stained eyes and smileless lips.

So she must act her part, learn to weep inwardly, teach her tongue the art of merry speech, compel her lips to smile; laugh, talk, behave as though she still knew what gladness was, as if her heart were fevered by no wild thirst. Grief rarely kills—her only chance of relief would be to learn patience quickly, in the hope that God might then shorten the period of her chastisement. And, as if to show that she had not yet mastered the first page of that hard lesson, poor Geraldine flung herself face downwards on the soaking turf, and sobbed out, "Let me die! let me die!" in a rebellious access of inconsolable despair.

It was a dismal morning. The air seemed literally full of rain—rain so fine and sharp that it pricked like needles, when the chill ever-shifting wind blew it hither and thither on back, or hands, or face. Overhead there was a ceaseless murmur in the firs, like the melancholy fall of distant waves. How grand they were, those tall, dark firs! blending their black-green hues with the dying splendours of chestnut, oak, and beech, whose lurid red and flickering yellow glowed like the last low flames of some dying conflagration. Here she had stood but yesterday with him, and, as they watched together the noiseless fall of leaf and acorn, he had reminded her that the life of a new spring was even then waking and stirring in the deadened boughs, and had promised to come with her to watch

the first young green appear. Only yesterday! So brief a space parted her from happiness, and yet it was left behind forever. So brief a space that she could say, to-day had risen joyously; and yet the gulf had opened, and moment by moment was widening between him and her who yesterday had clasped hands, driving them fast asunder, until a great sea would spread between, and his form fade, and his memory even perchance grow pale. Yes, the sea of Eternity would roll between them! In the absence of all outward bonds his love alone could have bridged the abyss, and he had *never loved her*.

The full, fell significance of this harsh truth was grasped by her for the first time now, when a word from him would have been sufficient to make her fly to his heart, and give up all the world for him—a word she knew well he could never speak.

“Oh, why did I ever see him?” she cried, with passionate tears. “Why did he ever come to kill my peace? I was happy till I saw him. Oh, Kenelm, Kenelm, had you not mercy enough to let me alone!”

Some hearts lie down quiet beneath a sudden grief, crushed by the very vastness of the load into a deadened stupefaction. But young strong hearts do not succumb without a fight; they grapple with the overwhelming foe, and lose life-blood in the hopeless struggle. Geraldine could not bring

self to yield to the hard destiny which in a stroke had taken from her all that made her sweet, and, as she fought with Fate, it assailed her with a hundred sharp spear-points, that made her cry out in short, spasmodic screams of pain, like some maimed and suffering animal. Her frenzy, which in her solitary hiding-place she did not think needful to restrain, at least exhausted, if it could not relieve her; and at last, spent, she grew quiet, and closed her eyes in a kind of mental torpor. She lay so still that the live creatures of the wood seemed unconscious of her presence. A small red squirrel settling himself close by composedly devoured a nut, the birds chirped undisturbed in the branches above her head, and brown rabbits, with uplifted tails, scampered gaily to and fro about her. Suddenly a thought struck her, which roused her from her brief stupor with a sob, less of pain than of some emotion akin to gladness.

He was in the Castle. She would go back and see him once again. It was not all over yet. Something yet remained before she could part from him for ever—a last word must be said, a last look taken. A light flashed all at once to have kindled in her darkness, and for a moment she basked in the brief radiance of the thought that she was able to behold him whom she loved more than in life. She arose, and once more the clinging self-consciousness, from which even

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the greatest emotion can but temporarily deliver us, asserted itself, and, desirous to hide from all eyes the frenzy to which despair had brought her, she smoothed her hair, tried to dry her soaking hat with her handkerchief, composed her features, and turned towards the house. Why did the old walls seem to frown upon her view as she hurried through the trees? Why had they lost their home-like, kindly aspect? Did they know that this was her last return to their shelter? That they themselves were passing into new hands, and that the family which had been reared within them would soon be cast out, and have no part or lot in them any more? Geraldine thought that she was sounding the very depths of human agony. But, guiltless in her suffering, one bitter drop at least was absent from her cup—the fiery drop of remorse, whose scars never heal. The man she went to seek was yet more wretched than herself.

The servants even, though they knew nothing of the communication made that morning to Archdeacon Egerton, could not fail to see that their master, as he wandered restlessly up and down the long galleries in the cold early light, shrank from their eyes, and hurried away when they came near. He had always hidden his inner feelings from his household with a proud reserve; and they were so unaccustomed to see signs of more than passing emotion in his face, that the change struck them with a kind of awe, and

he house seemed pervaded with a vague sense of oppression, as of some great calamity impending.

"He must have been very much attached to the boy after all," whispered Wentworth to Parsons, when the valet entered his little parlour to snatch a late mouthful of breakfast. "I am quite surprised to see him take on as he does. Do you think now, Mr. Parsons, that there is much danger?"

"We all know, Mr. Wentworth, that while there is life there is hope," answered Parsons, with a dubious air; "but I can't say but what I feel very uneasy. The doctor won't allow but what we can bring him round, but still I don't like his look, and it's my belief that his papa himself thinks he won't pull through."

"He don't seem to see much of the poor boy though, do he?" said Wentworth, pouring the remains of the gravy on his steak.

"P'raps he shrinks from seeing him so altered. He has been to the door several times to enquire, and once I opened it right on him without knowing he was there. He was listening, he said, to hear if his Lordship was coughing. He went in when I told him he was asleep, but he hadn't stood looking at him more than a minute when Lord Berkeley opened his eyes, and, not being quite come to himself, I suppose, started and turned away, and my Lord got as white as a sheet, and went straight out of the room."

"'Tis a pity he should take notice of anything like that," answered Wentworth, with an air of vast benevolence. "My poor Maria took against her mother just the same way when she was down with the typhus, and my wife was terribly upset by it, but I always said to her—'My dear,' I said, 'the poor child's delirious, and knows no better; and though it 'll be but nat'ral that you shouldn't be able to feel just the same to her as you did before, you mustn't let her feel you've taken against her now while she's so bad. Poor thing, she's now gone to a better world, and before she went she begged pardon like a lamb for all the wrong things she'd said of her dear mother.'"

"'Tis unfortunate this should have happened just as we've got company in the house," said Parsons, reverting to a theme of more immediate interest than the last utterance of the departed Maria Wentworth. "A trifle more butter, if you please, sir!"

"The Archdeacon and his family are leaving for home at once," answered Wentworth, as he supplied his friend's plate. "They go by the 12.40 train, and their boxes are being corded now. 'Tis best, certainly, to have the house to ourselves at such a time as this; but yet I almost wonder they should leave my Lord alone when he's in such trouble. Miss Egerton would have been a comfort to him, and I'm sure he needs keeping up if ever a

man did. Well, Richard, what now?" as a tall lacquey entered the room.

"Do you happen to know where my Lord is, sir? This here telegram has just come for him," and he glanced at the orange envelope in his hand.

"I will carry it to him myself," said the butler, condescendingly; and taking it from the hand of the unwilling Richard, to whom the delivery of a telegram had in it something alluringly sensational, Mr. Wentworth departed to the picture gallery. He could hear hasty, uneven footsteps as he approached, and he saw his master with bent head still pacing up and down, as he had paced an hour ago. He did not notice the respectful softness of the butler's tread till he had come close upon him, when, with a sudden start, he raised his eyelids, heavy and dark with grief.

"What is it?" he asked, quickly averting his glance.

"Excuse me, my Lord, this telegram has just arrived."

Lord Rotherhame took and hastily opened it. He read these words—

"HENRY MIDDLETON, 10, Bedford Row, Brompton, to the EARL OF ROTHERHAME AND BARKELEY, Rotherhame Castle, St. Dunstan's.

"I will be with you to-night by the train arriving at 9.15."

A slight flush momentarily tinged Lord

Rotherhame's cheek ; he thanked W briefly, and turned away, and the butl retired, heard his master tear the across, and resume his weary aimless to and fro.

The interruption, had, however, s arouse Lord Rotherhame from the in which he had been buried, and he conscious that the damp air of the l less gallery was creeping chillily bones, and that his eyes and he aching to distraction. He had beer like some traveller, who, after long returns home. For in all great cri history the soul instinctively reti steps, looking across the gulf of year its own altered yet familiar featur from this threshold of a new hard life's long journey, Kenelm Harold memory revisited his distant past visions of disgrace, exposure, avert judges, and jailers, his heart had tur unutterably sad and tender yearnin days that were no more—beholdir faces long dead, hearing well-know long hushed, living once again in tl scenes of unfettered youth, when be the pages of Life's Book lay fair an and the glamour of young love clc fresh world with glory and deligh friendships had come back, vanishe had gathered round him, the b children's voices, and the sound


little hurrying restless feet, had waked the echoes of the old corridor, and lo! he had walked alone no longer, for by his side had moved a fair girl-form, and a soft touch on his icy hand had thawed it into warmth. The spell had been rudely broken by his servant's voice, the dear illusion had faded, and in place of the bright old home, the smiling wife, the innocent laughing children clinging to their father's hand, appeared the desolate gallery full of emptiness and weird solitude; soundless, but for the mournful gusts and sleepless rain; monotonous, but for the dark shadows of coming change and death. Dragged back thus abruptly to face the terrible present, his mind recoiled with a kind of sickening dismay. In this place, surrounded by associations of state and dignity, he found it impossible to believe that a few hours would drive him forth from the home which had sheltered him and his so long, make his children outcasts and beggars, and himself a by-word among men. He gazed round at the pictures and the old oak furniture he had known from babyhood, the barrel-organ he had played on as a boy, the oriel window, through which he could distinguish the well known grassy garden-walks, and the wide forests he had looked on as his heritage. How unchanged they all were! how unconscious of their master's breaking heart! He passed into the library, where all lay ready for his morning's work, as it

had for years past. A novel, which yesterday had interested him, was open on the table, and by its side, the unfinished draft of an article he had been writing for the *Edinburgh Review*. Out yonder was the church, where Sunday after Sunday his children had prayed by his side, and a little further rose the thatched roofs of his poor people, whose wants he had relieved, and who had ever owned him as a kind and thoughtful friend. And as the sights and habits of the accustomed life began thus one after another to assert themselves, it seemed as if last night's events could be nothing more than an evil dream, whose unnatural influence continued to dog his waking hours.

The torn yellow envelope in his hand caught his eye. In this telegram there was sober reality at all events, and it told him more plainly than any words, that this day would be the last in which he could call Rotherhame his own. Surely these final precious hours must not be wasted in vain regrets. Some things there were that he must do before delivering his old home and himself over into hostile hands—before all, such private letters and papers must be destroyed, as might, without injury to his successor's rights, be denied to the prying eyes of public curiosity. The wheel of life must still turn round, and its daily duties be discharged, though hearts are breaking, and death draws nigh. Recovering himself with resolution

from his apathy, he opened in turns the cedar cupboards beneath the bookcases, and took thence several tied-up bundles of letters which he laid together on the floor. In one, whose dusty shelves showed that it must long have remained unopened, he came upon a hoard of almost forgotten toys, laid aside years ago by his little boy, as too babyish to be longer played with. They each came back with familiar distinctness to his recollection—the Noah's ark reserved for Sunday recreation, the gilded coach and four, and oh! how the sight of the blue wheel-barrow recalled the little eager gardener in his holland over-all, bearing it off, filled with dry leaves, to a distant shrubbery, and patiently retracing his steps to gather up afresh the fragments which the wind had blown from the unsteady load.

And then he came upon the first bat his boy had used, a diminutive bat, suited to its owner's size; and the mist of years rolled back, and clearly, as if it had been yesterday, he saw the small figure that had stood before him quivering with pride and excitement at the new possession, and the eager arms were round his neck, and his boy's soft cheek pillowed against his own, in delight and gratitude for which no language could be found. And again it seemed that he must be dreaming, that he would awake to find his little darling playing by his side. But no! the picture dissolves already, and with the



fading child-face blends another, like and yet unlike—not less sweet, but wan and sharpened, and whose white, drooping eyelids are closing in an awful still repose. Hastily he put the disused playthings back into their place, turned the key upon them, and sitting down at his writing-table, drooped his head upon his hands.

He remained thus motionless for near an hour, when a tap came at the door, and a moment after, without awaiting permission, some one entered, and approached him. Lord Rotherhame removed his hands, and through tears which oozed forth slowly, as though forced out by some over-mastering inner agony, perceived the face of Archdeacon Egerton—no longer kind and placid, but pale with an intensity of repressed anger. He began speaking in low, quick tones, and refused the chair which Lord Rotherhame offered him.

“I am obliged to you, my Lord,” he said, “for your letter of explanation—candid at last, though perhaps somewhat too late to meet my convenience. After its perusal you will not expect us to trespass longer on your hospitality. My daughter wishes me to inform you that her visit ends to-day, and that the relations in which you have stood to one another are from this moment at an end.”

Although he had thought himself fully prepared to face all that lay before him, Lord Rotherhame winced at the unaccustomed

sound of harsh, discourteous language, and his reply was made with visible and painful effort.

"I can of course do nothing but submit to your decision, Archdeacon Egerton—your daughter and yourself are perfectly right. It would be mere impertinence for me to attempt to express regret—my offence is one for which there is no apology! I should like, however, before she goes—to tell Miss Egerton that I am sorry."

To any dispassionate listener the words contained a world of unexpressed anguish, but the Archdeacon was deeply moved, and to his agitated ear they sounded cold and miserably inadequate. He bowed stiffly and remained silent.

"I do not wish you to see Geraldine again," he said at last, in a hard forced tone. "God knows you have made her miserable enough already. I do not for a moment mean to say that she can continue to feel her former affection for you; there are things which sap the very foundation of love in a pure and noble nature—but as you well know, storms such as this do not pass over and leave no mark behind. She will never be again the same fearless, joyous being she was before she knew you."

"O yes, yes, yes! she will get over it!" broke in Lord Rotherhame, with feverish eagerness. "Consider how young she is—scarcely eighteen, too young to know


her own mind. Some one else will come, ~~less~~ unworthy—and she will be happy again, and only remember this early episode in her history to rejoice that she escaped in time from the evil fate which seems to drag all that have to do with me down into the gulf.”

“You talk,” said the Archdeacon, in his sternest tone, “as if this ‘evil fate’ were something quite exterior to you, and had no connection with any fault of yours. This feeble fatalism is sheer unmeaning nonsense, though grateful enough, no doubt, to consciences which require the salve of a little convenient self-deception. In common justice, it is not unusual that an evil fate should attend such deeds as yours. Pardon me if for once I speak with plainness. To see a man so self-deceiving as you are, and to keep silence, is to me impossible. You have played the hypocrite so long with others, my Lord, that you have at last succeeded in deluding yourself.”

The quick blood mounted to Lord Rotherhame’s cheek, and in a moment spread over his brow.

“Go on, sir,” he said, “insult me to your heart’s content. Virtue is privileged to cast her stones at guilt.”

“Yes, I will go on!” rejoined the Archdeacon, beside himself, “and you may console yourself, if you can, by fancying yourself a tragedy-hero, the author of a sentimental and romantic crime, the victim of the self-righteous



and prudish condemnation of the moral. I know that is the fashion of the day."

"Proceed then," returned Lord Rotherhame, in a voice that shook, "I am prepared to bear whatever chastisement you may think fit to inflict. One thing I have learnt—that when I want mercy or justice, I must turn elsewhere than to a priest of God."

The Archdeacon felt the rebuke, and regretted that he had allowed his passion to carry him away.

"I do not wish to be unjust," he replied more calmly, "but I think, though I may be mistaken, that you do not realise what your offence has been. I could forgive any deed committed in hot blood, and under a sudden, sharp temptation; but to go on, as you have, eating up the substance of an orphan girl, while she, whose very helplessness should have made her sacred, was living on the cold bread of charity, is a thing simply unpardonable in a person so well instructed as you have been. How you can have gone on week after week attending the services of the Church, and desecrating God's treasury with the devil's alms, bearing before the world the character of a philanthropist and a man of honour, and all the time knowing yourself an impostor, who if discovered would be punished as a felon, passes my comprehension! And even if, through an unworthy fear of detection, you did consent to carry out this cold-blooded fraud, I think you might at

least have kept yourself to yourself, and not have gone out of your way to blight the life of a gentle girl who, true herself, believed in you, and whose heart was so full of love that it overflowed to the first plausible claimant that came across her path. What right had you, sir, knowing yourself to be what you are, to ask the hand of the daughter of an honourable English gentleman? Did you value your borrowed plumes so highly that you thought they could gild your falsehood, and make you a fit husband for a pure and lovely girl?"

Lord Rotherhame bent his head, as though beaten down by the torrent of the Arch-deacon's pitiless words. There was something unnatural and awful about the meek silence of this proud man, but Geraldine's father was smarting from his daughter's wrongs, and seemed in his anger on her behalf to lose all his usual generosity towards the fallen.

"And further," he went on, in tones of which each accent fell like a distinct blow on his listener's over-strained nerves, "you must needs make your own poor boy suffer for being more honourable than yourself. By your own confession you hated him because you felt his superiority, and, in your vain endeavour to scare him into a violation of his conscience, so tormented and ill-treated him, that at last you drove him from his home to be an outcast in the world, a prey to all its

Poisonous temptations. Did you never remember how it is written that it were better for us to be drowned in the sea than to offend one of God's little ones? How nearly might you have proved the eternal ruin of your motherless son. Shame upon you! Whatever else you did, you should have kept yourself from injuring innocent women and children!

"And now at last," continued Archdeacon Egerton, after a moment's pause for breath, "you are brought to confess your crime, and in return for that act of magnanimity you seem to expect that God is in all courtesy bound to grant you your son's threatened life. I tell you that, instead of driving bargains with your offended Maker, you should be upon your knees before him, overwhelmed with shame and contrition."

"And am I not?" answered Lord Rotherhame, suddenly raising his head, which he had sunk in his hands, and lifting his large eyes to the Archdeacon's face. "Perhaps with all your justice you wrong me a little in one respect, Archdeacon Egerton. I am not so utterly depraved as to feel no shame at the portrait you have presented to my gaze."

"Father, you shall not speak so to him!" cried suddenly a voice of mournful entreaty, and, by a simultaneous movement turning their heads her father and Lord Rotherhame saw Geraldine standing behind them.

She had glided in unperceived, had heard her father's last words, and now stood by with a pale pathetic face, damp hair, and eyes reddened by weeping. There was a dead silence in the room, and she drew nearer, stretching out her hands to the man she loved; but he, as if he neither saw nor heard her, stood motionless, and gave no gesture of response. The heavy lids which hid his eyes looked to her like drooping flowers about to die.

"What do you want here, Geraldine?" asked her father nervously, and laying his hand on her arm. "Go upstairs at once to your mother, and prepare for your journey. We start in half an hour."

"No, no!" she answered, pushing his hand aside with vehemence. "Leave me here, papa. I must say good-bye to Lord Rotherhame alone."

"My presence need not disturb you," he answered, fearing to quit her under a vague dread that she might in her present state of weakness and overstrained excitement involve herself afresh. "Take leave of him now. I will wait till you are ready to come with me."

Geraldine urged him no more, and by spontaneous impulse both she and Lord Rotherhame turned from him, and moved to the window at the further end of the room. There, face to face for the last time on earth Geraldine took his cold hands in hers, and

those two stood gazing long one on the other—an intense, rapt gaze—as if seeking thus to paint each other's features on their memories in colours which should never fade through all the coming years. It was to her like the last look before the coffin-lid is closed, the farewell kiss taken for eternity, and he was changed and icy as the dead. She could not bear the awful silence, and, finding that his lips were sealed, forced her own to break it.

"Kenelm," she said, "dear Kenelm—God help you!"

He remained mute, a hardly perceptible quiver of the lip alone showing that he heard her.

The Archdeacon's eyes were fascinated by the strange, sad picture; the great oriel window, with the wild rain sweeping without, and the pair who stood in its light, their faces, rendered transparent by suffering, revealing the passion-wrung souls within, and who, in their sex, beauty, and sorrow, seemed like Adam and Eve, representative types of that whole race of mankind on whom sin has brought the curse of pain.

"Kenelm," began Geraldine again, in low eager tones, "in a few minutes they will take me away, and there are things which I must say to you before I go. You are in a great strait, but these are times when we are made most to feel the goodness and the power

of God. I know very little of Him, but this I know : He is our Father, and we can never come to the end of His love and pity for us."

She spoke breathlessly, almost without connection, her colour changing at every word ; then paused for a reply. But he still remained speechless, only gazing on her steadfastly, with a dumb look of suffering.

"You must not grieve for me," she went on earnestly. "God knows what is best for me. Your nature is so much more deep, powerful, gifted than mine, that I never should have been fitted to be your wife."

And here the quick breath passed into a sob that could not be repressed.

"You will break my heart!" he said hoarsely.

It was like a revelation to him to see her thus, an angel in tenderness and compassion, yet so intensely human in her pain and patient grief.

"Whatever you may have done to others," she answered, with an effort commanding her failing voice, "you have been always good to me. I understand better now the spirit of sacrifice in which you sought me. You gave me a season of happiness such as few human beings have known, and you did not dream how quickly it would all be over. Others misunderstand your conduct to me ; I know you better, and till I die I shall remember it with gratitude."

"I *do* love you," he answered tremulously.

Now that I have lost you I begin to understand what you are to me! Go away now, Geraldine; your father is waiting—and wish to see you no more.”

He turned his face from her with an irrepressible movement of agony, but she refused to loose his hand.

“Kenelm,” she said, “it is the last time I shall have the chance of speaking to you, but the sting of parting will be taken away if I can only feel that I am leaving you at the Feet of God. When I am gone, remember my last entreaty, that you will pray and trust in Him. You must not despair. You have had strength to make confession in the face of all that must result. The first step has been taken on that road which ends in Heaven. Life seems very long, and the Way of the Cross is hard, but you must not flinch from it. Read it patiently and bravely, and day by day you will regain your self-respect and become more pure and noble. You will feel the deep peace of entire renunciation, enabling you to smile at earthly shame and loss, and, at the last—when He sees you are fit—God will call you away from this dark struggling world, and you will meet her again—your life—who prays and longs for you in Paradise.”

Absorbed in her over-mastering desire to comfort him, her voice, as she spoke, had lost all agitation, but at the last words, as the memory of her own deep wound, forgotten

for awhile, returned, it sank so low as to be scarcely audible.

"And there," she added, with a sudden gush of tears, "there, where there is no more marrying nor giving in marriage, and your soul and hers are one for ever in eternal perfecting and love, I may perhaps be somewhere near and see your face, for oh ! Kenelm, none but God can ever know how I have loved you !"

Her eyes were blinded as she spoke ; she could not see that he, too, was silent for very tears. She only felt that, still holding her hands, he stooped and kissed her cheek. It was a last kiss, and had in it a sacramental solemnity which made it unlike all other kisses, which enshrined on his side a vow, on hers a pardon and a blessing. Once more their eyes met, and then they loosed hands and parted. As the thrill of his touch died away, her transitory strength seemed to forsake her. Pale and trembling, she leaned upon her father, who, putting his arm tenderly about her, led her from the room. Her unselfish gentleness had taught him also a lesson, and as the first fierceness of his indignation passed away, he felt pricked with a secret remorse for the unsparing severity which he had shown. He took her to her mother, left her in her loving care, and returned once more to the library. Lord Rotherhame was standing as they had left him, his hands still

n, as if they unconsciously sought her.

When the Archdeacon entered, he turned him and said—


"I should like to kneel to you."

"Kneel to God," answered the Archdeacon calmly, but with a certain kindness in his voice. "He gives repentance, and He will pardon all who turn to Him."

He would have added more, but no words would come, and muttering an almost inaudible "good-bye," he parted from his host, hurriedly left him to complete his preparations for the journey. As he re-ascended the stairs, the wheels of the carriage which was to take them away could be heard rattling across the drawbridge.

They are not drawn to linger long over the painful hours of the hardest and saddest which ever rose on Geraldine's young life.

Weary and long with a protracted business of pain it was, and never did afterwards idealise it with that quiet beauty, which sometimes lights up sorrow when it is past and gone. Never did time so heal the wound as the day inflicted that she could recall it without a throb of agony—a secret shudder as if her nature should contain the capacity for so much suffering. The transition from her radiant summer to an ice-bound winter, had been so sudden that for a time it almost paralysed her, and after the supreme effort




of that last meeting in the library she sank into a frozen stupor. She got downstairs and into the carriage she knew not how, nor did she heed the curious, compassionate glances of the servants, as she passed them silently. Her father sat beside her in the carriage, and, putting his arm around her, tried to make her rest her head upon his shoulder as she had always loved to do. But after a moment she grew restless, started away from him, and, turning her head, looked all along the many windows of the old house, as if she hoped for one last glimpse of the face she was to see no more. She looked in vain, turned away with a sobbing sigh, and, some occupation seeming a necessity, kept on moving, glancing now backwards, now forwards, to this side and to that, at the familiar objects as they passed them by—the solemn Keep, the tall autumnal trees, the kennels, and the lodges. Her parents tried to distract her by an attempt at conversation, but she paid no heed when they talked with one another, and only writhed when they spoke to her. Mrs. Egerton longed ceaselessly for the time when Rotherham should be left behind, and her unhappy child no longer be tortured by its associations. They drove for two miles over grass, a deep soaked pathway under the shade of over-arching beeches; then the ground rose once more, and from the little height the Castle again appeared, closing the view down a long sweep.

of fern and moorland. It was useless to pretend to ignore it, and all eyes were drawn by a common fascination towards the ancient pile, whose strong turrets towered blackly against the lowering sky. Clouds were gathering thickly round it, like eagles round a fallen prey, and the Virginian creeper lit up the hoary walls with a red and hectic flush. The flag on the Keep drooped disconsolately in the heavy air, as though conscious of the fate that hung over its inmates, and of the dark shades of fear and death which were closing in around them. Geraldine had sprung up eagerly to look farewell, but as the turn in the road bore them once more out of sight, she sank back with a low moaning cry, that her parents could scarce endure to hear.

Dr. Bogle met them at the station. Mr. Meules had brought him a note from Nina, containing the stupendous tidings that Geraldine's engagement was, by her parents' wish, broken off, and that the whole party were going home by the mid-day train. He was shocked at the change in Geraldine when, as she alighted, he obtained his first glimpse of her stricken and half averted face, and a touch of real feeling for once softened his harsh voice as, forgetful of their late coldness, he took her hand, and murmured—

"God bless and comfort you, my poor, dear young friend, for He alone can."

She thanked him faintly, and keeping close



to her mother, followed her to the platform. The train was already in the station, so the Doctor put the ladies into their carriage at once, and kindly recommended Geraldine to lie down—a counsel which she did not hear, for she had retreated to the further end of the carriage, and was looking blankly out of the window at the smoky station wall, its dull notices, and hideous advertisements. Standing on the step, Dr. Bogle spoke in whispers with the Archdeacon, till the train began to move, and then, waving his large hat, watched it out of sight as it glided away past the woods and villages of the great Rotherham property into the dreary rain-washed country.

The journey was over at last—a *via dolorosa* which no light gladdened, and whose bourne was in truth a Calvary. But she was thankful at last to be shut up in her own room, where no eyes could follow, no tongues disturb her. They left her alone, lying in the big curtained bed, and she thought of the green churchyard hard by—the quiet, wet spot where her little sister rested—and wished that she could lie there too, among the still sleepers whom morning never wakes to suffer or to strive. The grey twilight was falling—she saw it fade slowly into night, heard the village children laugh in the lane on their way home to supper, and watched the evening star come out in the west. So infinitely distant did it seem as it

ed down with kind bright eye upon the
less girl, so far removed from Earth's
and passion, that it seemed to thrill her
its own high calm, and to send a
terious peace downward to her heart.
dually the warmth and comfort lulled her
es to a brief forgetfulness, and she sank
a deep sweet sleep.

Would God that in sorrow there were no
nings !

CHAPTER XV.

Press not a falling man too far ! 'tis virtue
His faults lie open to the laws ; let them,
Not you, correct him. My heart weeps to see him
So little of his great self.

SHAKESPEARE.


For men may pious texts repeat,
And yet Religion have no inward seat.

HOOD.

THE scene changes to the dining-room of the Deerhurst Vicarage.

It was two o'clock on a dull October day, and through the square windows could be seen the brown leaves falling on the paved street-garden ; while above, the grey skies lowered heavily. But within doors, though the fire was well-nigh stifled by the load of coals with which it had been lately replenished, and though occasional puffs of smoke made gloomier the gloomy northern room, the faces round the dining-table wore an unusually festive aspect. Mrs. Bradshaw, sitting upright for the first time for many years, was smiling amiably over her sweetbread ; her husband, dividing a neck of mutton among the remainder of the party, gave vent in an undertone to frequent and fervent laudations of a benevolent Providence, which to keep out the cold of advancing autumn, had picked out him and his to be the recipients of such comfortable

mercies as a warm fireside and a plentiful supply of butcher's meat. The pupils, without troubling themselves to say amen to their receptor's pious thanksgivings, obviously bared, in a general way, his sense of satisfaction. Thanks to the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Bradshaw's brother, they had that morning been granted a holiday, in honour of which event they indulged in a ceaseless interchange of witticisms, unfortunately uttered in such suppressed accents that none but the initiated could derive amusement from them. The only being whose countenance remained sunk in its habitual depression was the parlour-maid, now more harassed and listless than ever, and, since we last saw her, even more recklessly indifferent to the cleanliness of her cap, the concealment of her rizettes, and the collisions which constantly occurred between the lukewarm plates she carried and the skulls of the indignant pupils. Some familiar faces had vanished during the last six months, and conspicuous among the absentees were the young Lord Berkeley, whose seat of honour was abandoned to the pre-occupied looking son of a great Yorkshire M.P., little Dolly, the long-lost Josceline Murray-Carr, and the bewitching Caroline. On the left hand side of the study of the house sat her brother, the only person at the table who spoke above his breath, or seemed conscious that he had any social duty to discharge.



"I should think you must miss Carry a good deal, Anna," he called across the table to the eldest daughter of the house, who had lately taken to spectacles, and, hopeless of rivalling her step-sister's charms, had at the same time plunged headlong into literature, where at least she could count on having the field all to herself.

"Anna is too busy with her Xenophon and Homer to feel dull," said Mr. Bradshaw, with a smile. "What think you of a young lady taking up Greek, Middleton? Anna forms one of our daily class, does she not, Vesey? and bids fair to rival all her brother-students."

"It is a strange fancy," said Mrs. Bradshaw, "but I do not discourage it, for I always think it desirable that a single woman should have some special pursuit to occupy her thoughts."

The slightest allusion to matrimony, direct or indirect, being enough to produce a titter, the assembled young gentlemen here exchanged glances, and burst forth into a smothered giggle.

Anna looked up resentfully.

"I think some married women might not be the worse, either, for having a little mind," she remarked, with an air of gloom.

"I quite agree with you," said Mr. Middleton, to whose keen eye it was apparent that Mrs. Bradshaw's step-daughter had a hard time of it. "Stupid women ought to go

into a nunnery, and not expose society to the contagion of their dulness."

"It's all very well for you gentlemen to talk," said Mrs. Bradshaw, shaking her ringlets in a manner so sprightly that the son of the M.P. almost started from his chair. "But I wonder how you would look if all the pretty women were to run away, and leave you only the plain, clever ones. What woman was ever married but for her looks, I should like to know! I don't think Mr. Bradshaw wanted me for my intellect when he came to Bath after me—eh, Christopher?"

"I can quite believe that," returned her brother, with a face so grave as to be beyond the suspicion of satire.

"It would be hard to say what was my chief attraction," said Mr. Bradshaw, gallantly. "And now if everyone has finished, we will return thanks. Gentlemen, Mr. Middleton has to leave us at half-past three, so I shall be obliged to you to take your recreation early, and to rejoin me in the study at a quarter to four."

"Come back into my boudoir, Henry," said Mrs. Bradshaw, placing her fat little hand on her brother's arm. "Don't let us lose a minute. There is still so much to talk over with you before you go."

Mrs. Bradshaw's boudoir had been a store-room in the days of her homely predecessor, and was more of a size to accommodate jam-

pots than human beings. But all trace of its humble origin had been effaced, and the rose-wood sofa, papier-maché chairs, and plentiful ornamentations of crewel work and fancy cretonnes, presented to the eye a *tout ensemble* of unexceptionable and lady-like refinement. Mrs. Bradshaw sank upon the couch, and motioned the two gentlemen, who were squeezing themselves in behind her, to seat themselves at her side.

"I have been thinking all through dinner how we should break the news to Dolly," said Mr. Bradshaw. "What a surprise it will be to her, poor damsel! though she is as yet too young to take in the full significance of the change in her social status."

"I trust you will make her understand one thing," replied his wife, decidedly, "that it is entirely thanks to us that she has been brought up in a way to enable her to occupy her station without being ridiculed by every one. If she had not been left my ward, if I had not braved the censures of the world, and invited her here from time to time, and if mamma had not regularly had her with her in her holidays, she must have herded entirely with those dreadful low Weedons, and could have had no notion of the ways or manners of a lady."

"She struck me as being a decidedly well-bred, even distinguished-looking child," observed Middleton, "though I daresay you may have trouble in curing her of some little

tricks of speech she has caught up. I noticed she tacked on some unnecessary H's."

"O, shocking!" exclaimed Mrs. Bradshaw, with a faint scream. "To think of a countess having herded with *canaille* in a filthy little hovel on her own estate! What a come-down it will be, to be sure, for that stuck-up peacock of a man to have to turn out now for us!"

An unctuous smile of inexpressible gratification widened Mr. Bradshaw's mouth.

"It certainly illustrates the truth of the good old adage, 'Pride will have a fall,'" he said. "Poor man, after hugging himself all these years in his fancied importance, he will find it a painful ordeal to be humiliated before the world, which he has made his idol. I never did see, Middleton, a more melancholy instance of a man eaten up with worldliness and self-importance than that unhappy Lord Rotherham! May we be enabled to bring up our beloved Dolly with very different thoughts, and as far as in us lies, prepare the dear child truly to adorn the high station to which Providence has called her!"

"I only hope the little pussy-cat's head may not be completely turned," said Mrs. Bradshaw, with whose exultation at the new consequence suddenly reflected on herself, mingled personal feelings of rather spiteful envy at her despised ward's elevation.

"But, dear me! how shall we ever get through all we have to discuss!—do favour

us now with a few more particulars of your interview with the quondam Earl," said Mr. Bradshaw. "How *did* he look when he first had to face you? He must have been unpleasantly embarrassed!"

"Scarcely more so than I, I assure you. I was wretchedly uncomfortable, and for the life of me could not help feeling like a cuckoo come to drive a bird from its own nest."

"I think *he* was the cuckoo, who had so long wickedly appropriated the mansion of our dear niece!" ejaculated Mr. Bradshaw, with a smack of the lips.

"I think you have never seen Lord Rotherham, Mabel," said Mr. Middleton, unheeding this interruption. "He is a man not easily forgotten—one of the most high-bred looking gentlemen I have ever seen. I could not help feeling sorry for him; there is always something moving in the sight of a proud man brought low. He certainly will have to suffer, if ever a man had. Let alone all his heavier troubles, it goes hard with him to leave his old place, to which, I believe, he is passionately attached!"

"Scripture itself tells us that 'the way of transgressors is hard,'" responded Mr. Bradshaw. "The wretched man has only himself to thank for his misfortunes."

"That he has, horrid creature! and I am sure I hope he will be thoroughly well punished!" cried Mrs. Bradshaw, with unusual vehemence.

"No fear that his punishment will not be ample enough to satisfy even your sense of justice," rejoined her brother. "Troubles seem to be thickening round him on all sides. To begin with, there is the public exposure and disgrace; then the beggary and loss of rank. As a matter of course his *fiancée* has washed her hands of him, his poor boy is, I fancy, dying, and, to finish up, he will no doubt have a heavy sentence of penal servitude. Whatever his past misdeeds, it is impossible to despise a man who voluntarily makes restitution at such tremendous cost."

"His children will be quite destitute, I suppose, when their father is in confinement," said Mrs. Bradshaw, with an air of languid satisfaction. "What on earth will they do with themselves, I should like to know? for, of course, the girls have been brought up fine ladies, and are not naturally fitted to go it as governesses or anything of that sort!"

"We must look into that," said Mr. Bradshaw, with a magnificent smile—he had already welled into a great man. "Their case must be properly laid before us and investigated, and if we find it a really deserving one we must mete out a little assistance, remembering always that these unfortunate young persons are in no way responsible for their parent's wrong doings"

"I don't think they will have to come upon

you," answered Mr. Middleton. "Their father told me that his father had left him his own small fortune of ten thousand pounds. Of this, however, he says he shall only retain sufficient to keep their bodies and souls together, and the rest will be paid into her little ladyship's exchequer, to go some way towards the liquidation of the debt he has incurred during the years in which he has spent her money. He told me also that his former domestic chaplain had offered to give them a permanent home in his own parsonage in London. But I wish now to speak briefly with you on a point of the utmost importance," and Middleton suddenly grew grave. "No one can, of course, deny the fact that the circumstances under which Simon Marley lost his life threw the darkest suspicions on the persons most to be benefited by his death, and by whose connivance the suspected murderer was concealed from the police. Lord Rotherhame has told me his own story, and I am bound to say that morally I feel certain of its truth, and that I verily believe the guilt rested with his mother, not with himself; and yet there is no doubt that to the world in general he must be the subject of very ugly suspicions."

"Ha!" said Mr. Bradshaw, with a knowing wag of the head, "a glib tongue and loud assertions of innocence have come round your soft heart to the prejudice of your better

judgment, Henery. It is a very cowardly thing of this Mr. Harold"—

"Sir Kenelm!" interrupted Middleton, "his father was a baronet, you know."

"Sir Kenelm, then," continued Mr. Bradshaw, with a shade of disappointment in his tone; "it is a very cowardly thing in this Sir Kenelm to attempt to avert suspicion from himself by casting a slur on his dead mother's name."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Mr. Middleton, impatiently, "the confession of Lady Rotherhame, which we are told will be found in her coffin, and which, by the evidence of two persons, was written by her own hand, would tell the whole story, even if he had kept silence, and if he wished to make reparation to Dolly at all, he had no alternative but to speak the plain truth. Now the question is, shall we, as the next of kin, use the child's money to institute a prosecution against him ourselves? or shall we—to which course I am decidedly inclined myself—leave the public prosecutor to take up the case if he thinks the evidence strong enough to fix the crime on the accused."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Bradshaw, "throw off on the public the awful responsibility specially committed to us by Divine Providence, of bringing to just punishment the cruel hypocrite who barbarously took the life of our unprepared, and, I fear, uncon-

verted relative. No, Henery! I thought your first letter to us implied some sentimental weakness of this kind, and I cannot be a party to it."

"You seem to forget," said Middleton, angrily, "that there is such a text in the Bible as 'Blessed are the merciful.'"

"And *you* seem to forget that it is not always the truest mercy to shield the guilty from punishment, and that it is by chastisement that Jehovah elects chiefly to bring transgressors to a change of heart."

"And *you* forget that we owe a little gratitude to the man who, without waiting for any legal process, and in the face of all personal risks, voluntarily gives his whole and enormous property into our hands."

"Is not excitement rather carrying you away, my dear Henery? Owe a debt of gratitude to the person who for five years has robbed our beloved orphan-niece of her rightful patrimony, and on whom rests the grievous guilt of having plotted our brother's destruction!"

"You beg the whole question," said Middleton, shortly.

"Far from it, I do not conclude positively that he is guilty, but I do assert that it is our positive duty to sift the matter to the bottom, and that it would be a meanness in us to put off upon the State the pecuniary burden of a case in which we have so deep a personal interest. No, Henery, this is a point of prin-

ciple with me, and from it I dare not, and will not, swerve."

"You must do as you please," said Middleton, who knew that any further argument would only harden his brother-in-law in his obstinacy. "But at least I call upon you, in recognition of all the efforts I have made, to respect my engagement that the family shall be left in undisturbed possession while the poor young fellow lives. This was the single favour his unhappy father asked of me, and it was wrung from him by sheer agony at the prospect of being torn away from his dying child. You cannot have long to wait."

"And in the meantime the good gentleman will be taking to his heels, I suppose!"

"I make myself answerable that he will not. It is not likely that he would make a voluntary confession, if he had not meant to face its consequences."

"And I am sure it will serve him only too well right if we do prosecute him," put in Mrs. Bradshaw, "after the grossly insulting manner in which he has treated Christopher, and our whole family. He will find that it is our turn to turn up our noses now."

"Mabel, Mabel, my love! No personal feeling of revenge must be allowed to move us here. Poor Sir Kenelm Harold! I am sure that it is my earnest prayer that this poignant humiliation may be for the everlasting good of his undying soul."

"He talked the whole of this question over

with me," said Middleton, "and I could get him to express no wish, one way or the other, on the subject of the prosecution. All he would say was to ask the favour of being left, if possible, unmolested, till after his son's death, and also to tell me that he should in no case stand upon his privileges as a peer, but take his trial in the ordinary way, like any other man."

"Peer, but he is not a peer!" shrieked out husband and wife in chorus.

"Wait till that is proved," said Middleton, coldly.

"Well," said Mr. Bradshaw, graciously, "I will write and tell him that I yield to your merciful suggestion, on the express condition that he gives me a solemn promise in writing that he will not attempt to make off."

There was some more discussion, rather hot on both sides, but at last a little timely peace-making on the part of Mrs. Bradshaw, who was in an extraordinarily good temper, smoothed away the asperities of the two disputants, and the conversation assumed a more amicable tone.

"Po-or Berkeley, as we used to call him," sighed Mr. Bradshaw, presently. "How one traces the Hand of Providence in every event of life, Henery! Had our shortsighted wishes been carried out last winter, our beloved daughter might herself have been involved in the disgrace which that wretched Sir Kenelm has brought on all connected with him."

"The daughter-in-law of a swindler!" exclaimed Mrs. Bradshaw. "One cannot, indeed, be too thankful for her escape. I hope, Henry, that the poor lad may be able to make a move before very long. One does not wish to be unkind, I am sure; but still, for all we know, he may go on for months, and in that case we really should hardly feel justified in waiting; for, of course, Car must have the opportunity of a little gaiety in her new home before her marriage, which, as you know, is fixed for Easter."

"In the interest of her present young man, should not advise her mixing too freely in society before that happy event," said Middleton, laughing. "Carry might fall in with a variety of rich suitors, who would possibly tempt her to weary of her country swain."

Perhaps Mrs. Bradshaw, in her secret heart, did not regard this as an altogether undesirable contingency. At all events she emphatically pooh-poohed her husband's suggestion that they should wait to take possession of the Castle till Easter, and then make the move, whether the sick boy still lingered or not.

"You know, my love," he urged, "we are already near the middle of October, and I think it would be more fair and courteous to give the parents of my pupils warning of my intentions, at least a term before I give up work."

"Fair and courteous, fudge!" she an-

swered. "Write round at once and tell them that you break up for good the week before Christmas, and if there should be any little pecuniary loss, I don't think the husband of the Countess of Rotherhame's guardian need stick at a few pounds, more or less. I wish the child to be at the Castle to keep Christmas, or the New Year at latest. A little further on we must be going up to town to buy things, and see to the house there—in St. Jerome's Square, is it not?—and we ought to have a clear month at the Castle first. You must take a day or two's holiday, Mr. Bradshaw, to go to Rotherhame and see into things, and make any arrangements that are necessary by way of preparation for our coming. I shall at once despatch Anna to Scotland to bring Dora down from her school, that we may try to get her a little into trim, and rid her of a few of her unfortunate vulgarities before all the grandees of Westshire come to the Castle to pay us their respects. The interval before leaving this house will be busy enough, I am sure, what with the packing up and the P.P.C. calls, and one thing and another."

"You were telling us, when the dinner-bell rang, about the inquest on the man Tibbetta, Middleton," said Mr. Bradshaw; "and I think you remarked that the body had been opened yesterday, and thoroughly examined by competent medical authorities."

"Yes; and the verdict was 'Death by

effusion of blood to the brain.' Of course the old wretch's health must have been greatly injured by his long unwholesome imprisonment; but apart from that, Lord Rotherhame was in no way answerable for his death. But haven't to-day's papers come? They will contain the inquest. It must have been telegraphed up to town last night."

"The *Standard* will be here immediately. One or other of my pupils is sure to call for it at the bookseller's."

"You can walk as far as Edwards' with Henry when he goes, and bring back a couple of papers," said Mrs. Bradshaw, anticipating with delight a full glut of horrors after her brother's departure.

"And that reminds me," said Middleton, glancing at his watch, "that I ought to be making a start. We take full ten minutes walking to the station, do we not, Bradshaw?"

"Ten minutes, whereas by the 'bus, which is always stopping about, we generally allow twenty. You will run down as soon as you can, Henry, and have another chat about this painful business."

"I will if I can, and I hope one of your young ladies will favour me shortly with some account of dear little Dolly, and how she takes the great tidings."

"And by the time we meet again I trust you may have recovered your spirits a little," said his sister, exerting herself to return his

kiss. "You look very so-so at present, Henry."

"I confess that time at Rotherhame did give me a touch of the blues," he returned, with a sigh. "I never saw a man whose appearance so captivated my fancy as Sir Kenelm. But I can see you are both thinking me a sentimental idiot, so I will hold my peace. Good-bye, Mabel. I shall be hearing of you at Her Majesty's Drawing Room and State Ball shortly I suppose! Are you coming, Bradshaw?"

"Just so far as Edwards'," responded the clergyman, "and then I must return here and assemble my family, that they may all return thanks for the great favour that has been bestowed upon us."

Middleton shrugged his shoulders, and strode impatiently from his sister's boudoir.

CHAPTER XVI.

A widow bird sat mourning for her love
Upon a wintry bough,
The freezing sky crept on above,
The freezing stream below.

SHELLEY.

"Weep not for the dead neither bemoan him, but weep sore
for him that goeth away, for he shall return no more, nor see his
native country."

THE brief winter afternoon was drawing to
a close, and the sun was setting, a pale
yellow ball, behind a copse of sturdy fir trees,
high at the west of the village of Grantham
rose up high and dark against the sky. It
seemed to be vanishing early, as though in
disgust at the ugliness and bareness of the
post-bound world, and night was hastening
up to shroud with her friendly veil the dingy
landscape, its miry ploughed fields, skeleton
trees, isolated hay ricks, and grey all-
pervading fog. Can this be the same earth
which a few months since was ablaze with
light and colour—stretching its green glories
before the view, like an emerald island in a
sapphire sea, whose trees waved their laden
branches with a ceaseless murmur against
the azure sky, whose bright flowers bathed
their gentle hues in divinest sunlight, whose
very air was impregnated through and through
with warmth and sweetness? Who has

wrought the transformation? It is the old jester,—Time,—who makes but to mar; whose scythe mows down the choicest flowers in his carefully-stocked garden; who disfigures his own gay paintings, and who daily drives his victim-children like flocks of sheep towards the open shambles of cruel Death.

Coming over a high, brown ridge of earth, and descending into the valley, whence rose the red brick chimneys of the Rectory, four girls moved at a vigorous pace, warmly wrapped in furs. It was the day before Nina's wedding, and the bride-elect had driven to the station to meet the anxiously expected Mr. Meules. Geraldine and Gertrude Egerton had walked with Ann and Josephine Nutting to some distant cottages in their father's parish, and Ann had seized the opportunity of sowing seed by the wayside in the shape of anti-sacramentarian tracts, which she had dropped here and there, in the hope that they might be picked up and inwardly digested by any unsound rustic theologians that might pass that way. Onward she stumped with cheery vigour, her nose and cheeks stung into purple by the bitter atmosphere, and bearing the chilblains on her hands and the clods of mud on her weary feet with Spartan fortitude.

Geraldine walked with the same free, swinging pace as ever; but old Time had played his tricks with her too, and the snows of a spiritual winter had fallen on her cheeks,

once so blooming. She was talking animatedly enough with Ann, but ever and anon she lifted her eyes from the repellent, unlovely scene around her, and gazed with yearning weariness towards that one part of the cloud-laden sky where the sinking sun had cleared himself a little space, and where his yellow light mocked the eye with its impenetrable depth of crystal clearness.

"Let's get on quick," said Ann. "Put your best leg forward, Joey; I wouldn't miss the arrival of the bride and bridegroom for anything!"

"They won't be here very punctually for certain," said Gertrude. "Think of the endless shops the carriage has to call at, and the wedding-cake, and the hams, and all the good things that have to be brought home."

"I am sure one oughtn't to have wanted anything from town," said Josephine, "with all those beautiful fowls and creams and cakes that have been done at home. Really the larder was a perfect sight this morning."

"Have you made up your mind to be present at the ceremony, dear?" asked Ann of Geraldine, softening her blunt voice to accents of respectful sympathy.

"You forget I am to officiate as bridesmaid," she answered, smiling.

"'Tis a long while since I have attended a marriage by a minister of the Establishment," said Ann; "not once during Mr. Johnson's

pastorate that I can remember. I hope, Geraldine, there won't be anything very 'high' in the service."

"I don't mind singing a hymn," put in little Josephine, in a conciliatory tone, "but I do hope we shan't be having choristers in surplices, or anything of that sort. It would give one an unpleasant sort of feeling, as if they hadn't been properly married."

"It'll be entered right enough in the register at all events, Joey," said Gertrude; "and for additional security, you might have it announced in the *Times*."

"And after the Archdeacon has been so handsome about the breakfast, I am sure we oughtn't to make a fuss," said Ann aside to her sister. "I don't suppose the Romanising clergy are ever married in their vestments, are they?"

"O, if Herbert wears anything of that sort, I am sure his black gown would look far the nicest," gasped Joey, breathing hard as she attempted to keep up with Ann.

At this moment the voice of little Harriet could be heard, calling from an upper window of the Rectory.

"Run, run, Nuttings all!" she cried; "the carriage has turned the corner, and the lovers will be here directly. Georgy has gone to the gate to wave his flag."

Thus adjured, the little party redoubled speed, and succeeded in reaching the Rectory before the descent of Herbert and Nina from

the carriage. Mrs. Egerton stood at the door ready to receive the young couple with open hands of hospitable welcome, and around her clung an obstructive throng of excited little children. Nina crossed the courtyard leaning on the arm of her affianced husband, but on reaching the porch quitted it, to throw herself impetuously into her friend's arms."

"He is so good, so very, very dear," she whispered. "And oh! dearest Mrs. Egerton, if you could only have heard how beautifully he has been speaking on the way home about the responsibilities and privileges of Holy Matrimony!"

And then, flying round the group, she repeated the same process to each in turn; while Mr. Meules, stretching his long crane-neck, received the felicitations of his hostess with an air of feeble jocularity. He seemed fully alive to the pleasure and importance of his position; and as he pressed his thin lips to the cheeks of his new sisters-in-law, still wet with Nina's happy tears, he glanced curiously at Geraldine, perhaps noting the contrast between her gay manners and her pale cheeks and heavy eyes, around which sleepless nights had drawn dark circles. But scant time was allowed him for observation, and impelled forward by eager feminine hands and voices, Herbert was now guided to the drawing-room, where the senior Miss Nutting, on the extreme edge of an armchair, awaited

tremblingly his coming. On the very verge of hysterics, her incapacity to respond to his polite greetings placed him in a slightly embarrassing position; and he was thankful when, after having gazed on him for some minutes in silence, she recovered her composure sufficiently to say—

“We don’t agree as to doctrine at all, you know, Mr. Meules. You worship at St. Alban’s, or somewhere like that, do you not? Sisters tell me I ought not to expect anything else of Nina’s husband; but I don’t know, I am sure! Dear mother, she’s not here, you know; she never attends the services of the Church of England now, nor, indeed, can she find any church that teaches all the truth.”

“So I have heard, Miss Henrietta,” answered Herbert, gravely. “I hope very much to have a little talk with your good mother, and trust that ultimately I may be able to set her scruples at rest, and restore her to the bosom of the Catholic Church.”

“Yes; I don’t mind, I’m sure, what denomination my dear ones belong to, so long as they don’t have anything to do with the Catholic Church,” cried Miss Henny, catching his last words only, and hopelessly at sea as to their context.

“There is but one true Church after all, Miss Henrietta, you know,” began Herbert, instructively, “though divided into three branches—the Anglican, the Gre—”

"Yes, that's where 'tis; there are so many now-a-days," responded Miss Henny. "Dear, dear, I am so upset," she went on, looking wildly round her. "You must tell Mr. Meules, Ann, that I am not equal to the discussion of doctrine, and I hope he won't expect it of me."

"There, there now, Henny," interrupted Ann, "don't excite yourself; why must you get talking on our sectarian differences directly you see Herbert? Never mind her," she added, soothingly, to Mr. Meules; "she's a little overcome now, but she'll be better by-and-bye, after she's had a good dinner."

"Come upstairs," said Gertrude, who during the foregoing scene had had hard work to hide her laughter; "Miss Nutting is calling you, Mr. Meules. I think she wants to show you some of her things."

Herbert, relieved to escape from his puzzle-headed sister-in-law, willingly acceded, and was led up the low, easy staircase to a large fire-lit spare bed-room, which Nina at present shared with Ann. The little governess, her face crimson with delight, was standing by the bed, whose snowy counterpane was hidden beneath piles of embroidered linen, gloves, silk dresses, hats, and jackets. The articles, as they lay spread out to view, looked too rich and costly to have been originally intended for the wife of a needy curate—they were, in fact, part of the trousseau ordered last summer for the

expectant Countess of Rotherhame. Harriet, skipping with truly feminine delight, acted show-woman, and exhibited all the beauties of the collection ; while Ann and Josephine, not daring to touch, stood gazing in admiring silence. Geraldine, meanwhile, released from one of Nina's ardent hugs, withdrew a little from the busy group, and stood with her back towards them gazing out of the window at the dreary landscape.

"I suppose you despise all this finery, Mr. Meules?" observed Gertrude.

"Whose are all these fal-lals, pray?" inquired Herbie, smiling.

"They are all mine, and what is mine is thine," returned Nina, with a playful frisk.

Moved by a kind, honest impulse, Ann turned round and went to Geraldine.

"I wish you could have worn them yourself with all my heart, dear," she said.

Geraldine turned and looked at her with a smile, which, although sweet, was very wintry, and the wilful tears sprang to her eyes.

"Thank you, Ann, dear," she answered ; and then, after a pause, mastering her voice, she added : "But as that could not be, I am delighted that Miss Nutting should have them. Some, which she declared were too smart for a parson's wife, I have divided among Gertrude and my cousins. And now, Ann," she went on, resuming with an effort her cheerful tone, "let us take Mr. Meules

to see the wedding-presents. The school-children are to be here at six o'clock to present their 'Christian Year.'"

Meantime, Miss Henrietta was gradually subsiding into calm, and after dinner was so far recovered as to be able to take part in the ceremony, postponed till Herbert's arrival, of presenting Nina with the various wedding offerings prepared by herself and her family. The box was opened in the drawing-room in the presence of the assembled company, and terrible was the agitation with which Miss Henny watched the extrication from its coverings of straw and paper of her own gift, a little velvet case containing a garnet ring, recently purchased, and a hair brooch which had belonged to her grandmother before her. Nina flew to offer up thanks and receive her elder sister's blessing; but when a few minutes later the paper parcel containing the remainder of her present, two electro-table and half a dozen tea-spoons, were produced, Miss Henrietta's emotion became so excessive, that her sisters were fain to lead her from the room. Ann's contribution to Nina's future housekeeping consisted of a pair of tall green and gold flower vases, and an inkstand in the shape of an apple; while Josephine was found to have tatted six beautiful antimacassars for her drawing-room. The liberality of Muzza, also, must not be forgotten. Large-hearted Muzza!


who, though conscientiously incapacitated from attending the Episcopalian wedding, had shown her benevolent interest by sending Nina a large-print Bible, on the blank pages of which she had strung together, apparently without connection, a variegated collection of texts.

The anxiously expected morning dawned at last—dawned with pouring rain and moaning wind. Bride and bridesmaids were up before the sun, and eagerly were the skies scanned for some break which might warrant the hope that a change of weather was at hand. But the clouds proved inexorable, and not all the tappings of the barometer, nor the frantic consultations of weather-wise gardeners, could avail to stop the steady, drenching downpour. Still, in spite of all difficulties, triumphal arches were laboriously erected along the path leading to the church, and within the sacred edifice groups of villagers were assembling, to witness the unfolding of rolls of crimson carpet, and other preparations.

The interior of the Rectory bore a highly festive aspect. The air was odorous with the scent of hothouse flowers lying about in heaps on floors and tables, and in the school-room lay in state the bridal wreath and bouquet of myrtle, jessamine, and orange-blossom. The wedding-dress and veil—the Archdeacon's especial gifts—were there also, shrouded in a transparent muslin covering,

and constantly eyed with awe-struck admiration by the little Egertons. The previous evening had been diligently spent by all in concocting favours and making up bouquets, and the fragrance of the flowers had haunted Geraldine even in her sleep, so that she had dreamed there was a corpse in the house awaiting burial, that she had been helping her sisters to tie up funeral nosegays, and that it had fallen to her lot to make a wreath of orange-blossom for the dead. And as she worked the garland had changed into a cross, and when she had gone into the hushed schoolroom to lay it in the coffin, she knew that the dead face would be the face of him she loved, and she had beheld with awe the large, half-open eyes and high pallid brow. And as she bent over him, it had seemed to her that the dead man had tried to shake off the bands of death, and to look at her with love; and she had taken his long cold fingers in her own, and kissed his lips. The cold kiss had awakened her, and she had found herself out of bed leaning against the marble mantle-shelf. And she shook and shivered, and wondered whether he were going indeed to die, and she longed to haste away while yet his heart was warm and his eyes alive, and throw herself into his arms to live and die with him.

It was not unusual for the poor child to pay by a frenzy of despair, when alone at night, for the long daylight hours of self-



repression and concealment, and ofttimes in her weakness she might have thrown down her arms, forsaken the weary conflict, and yielded to the magic fascination which drew her back to him, had she but felt sure that he would have given her a shelter in his heart. But the chill conviction that she had no home there kept her back, and the long eternal days that had passed since she had felt his last kiss must, she thought, have extinguished the sudden tenderness, which in that final interview, compassion had awakened in him. "He has his own loves, his own sorrows," she thought, wearily, "and what place is there left for me!" So this night she had got back to bed and had lain sleepless for hours.

Rain, rain, rain! Down it came, as though making up for the lost time during which the frost had grimly locked it up in the dull cloud-prison, and at the hour when the bridal party was to proceed to church the torrent seemed to descend with peculiar acrimonious vehemence. But neither wind nor weather could keep the public from assembling. There they were, open-mouthed rustics of all ages and degrees, lining the path, and standing on the monuments. Ann, scared by the fashionable cut of the bridesmaids' dresses, had declined to take any official part in the proceedings; and indeed, looked sufficiently a fish out of water in her white opera-cloak, and dress of bright blue alpaca.

Seated by her eldest sister's side, in a pew by the altar, she anxiously awaited the arrival of the bride, and murmured—"Dear little body!" with irrepressible sisterly pride, as, with blushing cheeks and downcast eyes, Nina floated up the aisle, leaning on the Archdeacon's arm.

Following, came Josephine—whose hair, despite the forest of hair-pins that bristled all about it like a porcupine's quills, was already on the point of coming down—Geraldine, Gertrude, and Harriet, with Henny, who, artificially sustained by smelling-salts, was actually only moved to tears three times during the affecting ceremony. Firstly, when her suspicious nostrils detected a faint perfume of bygone incense, and she thought of "Muzza" and her uncompromising opposition to error; secondly, when Herbert's manly steadfast voice, and Nina's all but inaudible accents, pronounced the irrevocable "I will;" and, thirdly, when the Archdeacon kissed the bride in the vestry.

A few seconds later a jubilant peal of bells and the triumphal strains of the "Wedding March" proclaimed to the parish of Grantham, that Nina Nutting's career and ministrations among them were at an end. Then the procession re-filed, and soon all tongues were unloosed, and eager criticisms began on the details of the service—the music, the dresses, the appearance and behaviour of bride and bridegroom.

The breakfast was spread in the dining-room, and the Rectory tables were laden with good cheer, to which ample justice was done. Mr. and Mrs. Meules sat behind a wedding-cake of huge dimensions, and opposite them were ranged the fair bridesmaids and their groomsmen—all curates, who feasted to their hearts' content on the orthodox dainties of trifle, ices, and lobster-salad. The Archdeacon, inspired by beholding so many of the class gathered round his board, dwelt in his speech on the wrongs, and the generally half starved and overworked condition, of curates at the present day, and declared that he was indeed rejoiced to find that the fair Bride, whose many charms and virtues he had long known by personal experience, had taken compassion on the oppressed race in the shape of one of its members, his esteemed friend the Bridegroom.

Herbert, in reply, dwelt much on the blessedness of union, whether with the Roman Communion, the Churches of the East, or—a lovely woman, “such,” he concluded, “as is—my wife!”

This scarcely original climax had been led up to by a long elaborate process, and was received with the applause it consciously deserved.

“Never, never, can I thank you enough for all your goodness to poor little me, dear Archdeacon!” faltered Nina, when at last

she came downstairs dressed for departure. "I do feel so parting from you all, and giving up lessons, the walks with the girls, and the beautiful services, and everything. But I am going to a place where I shall have at least equal church-privileges, and I trust that you will all before very long give me the happiness of welcoming you to my new little home."

"Some day, I hope, dear child," answered the Archdeacon, kindly. "We shall all want to see you in your own house, but"—and here he glanced significantly towards his daughter—"I don't think it will do to talk of it, at any rate for some months to come. A curate is but a bird of passage after all, and who knows but what you may be shortly moving to some Rectory of your own, and then, I am sure you would not have to wait long before sustaining an invasion from Grantham. We cannot think of going to Rotherhame at present, though I fervently hope that the day will come when Diney will be able to do so without the acute pain she would feel just now."

"I think she is beginning to get over it already, though," said Nina, "she takes quite an interest now in what goes on about her, and dear Herbie was surprised that she made no inquiries of him as to any of the Harolds."


"Ah! that does not astonish me," said the Archdeacon. "It is a painful subject, and

she naturally shrinks from all mention of it. But here comes the carriage! I can't think how we shall get on at our parochial feast without you to help pour out the tea and carry round the buns. I think you are quite bound to stay and help us."

"Some one else would object to that, I fear," said Nina, laying her hand playfully on her husband's arm. "Do you feel disposed to leave me behind you, old man?"

The Reverend Herbert endeavoured to respond with gallantry, but repartee not being his strong point, he was still searching for a retort, when Nina, enjoying the brief glory of Bridehood, was swept from him by his brother curates, who came round her in a body, eager for a parting word. Then followed tears, adieux, warnings and blessings, showers of rice and slippers. Outside the Rectory-gates was a crowd of villagers, met to send a parting cheer after the white horses which drew away bride and bridegroom, and many of them wiped their eyes—for there are few whose hearts are not moved by the spectacle of a union which, rung in by a merry marriage peal, will be rung out by a funeral knell.

Happily the hour of stagnation following the disappearance of the principal *dramatis personæ* was enlivened by instant occupation, and no sooner had the last gleam of Nina's fluttering handkerchief vanished round the corner, than the Archdeacon summoned his



guests to follow him to the coach-house, where a feast for the poor parishioners had been prepared.

"I shall not put in an appearance just yet, papa," said Geraldine, as she received a personal summons to attend; "if such an army attempt to wait upon the people we shall fall to quarrelling for want of anything better to do."

Her smile lingered till the last of the party had disappeared, and then the old haggard look settled again on her face, and as she returned to the drawing-room, and leaning against the window, watched the carriage appear once more upon a height far off and then vanish over the hill, a fierce, almost hungry light stole into her eyes. None could tell what this day had been to her, nor how its every detail had brought back with torturing vividness, her by-gone blessedness, and the dreams she had dreamed of love and marriage. She had heard repeated by others those wondrous stirring vows, which she had once been wont nightly to con over to herself with secret rapture. She had stood by, and seen the nuptial benediction uttered over a young pair who had given themselves to each other for better and for worse, for life and for death. How would *his* voice have sounded as he took those vows, she wondered. Would he have held her hand as they knelt in prayer before the altar? Would he have raised her veil when all was over, and kissed

her as his own? How proudly she would have sat by his side at the wedding-feast! feeling, spite of all the laughing, chattering crowd, that they were alone together, twain made one, in the Name of God. Ah! were she but driving away in that distant carriage, going out into the world for the first time with him—his property, his charge, his wife! to be loved, protected, cherished! Poor child, the unused heart submits hardly to the yoke! and unable to bear the contemplation of the joys that might have been, she turned from the window and the grey landscape on which the sun was fast descending, drove the mad dream from her, and began pacing the room with clasped hands and hurried, uneven steps. Something she had to be thankful for, at all events—the wedding, the dreaded ordeal, was over, and they could go back to the old hum-drum life. The newly-married pair had gone now, were on their way to Rotherhame—to the place which still as yet enshrined the centre of her being, and to which she must herself go never more. For the last month she had been sunk in a kind of hopeless lethargy, had cared neither to read nor write, had missed even what the papers had had to say concerning the quondam Earl of Rotherhame, and his real or supposed offences. But this evening she suddenly began to feel impatient of her ignorance, regretful that at whatever cost she had not endeavoured to

from something of him, even from such an ornament as the lately departed bridegroom. Tired of suffering, of praying, of longing, she ceased her walk, and stood vacantly in the middle of the room. The *Times* newspaper lay upon the table, and prompted by a morbid curiosity to learn something of the world from which she had been so long cut off, she drew near, and glanced over it with listless dreary interest. Her eye, wandering restlessly among the columns, was arrested by the name which half unconsciously she sought. Uttering a low cry, she leaned over the page, and read—

‘On Christmas Day, at Rotherham Castle, Westshire, Ralph Kenelm Plantagenet, eldest son of Kenelm and Mary Harold, aged fifteen years. R.I.P.’

Ferdinandine laid the paper down, and instinctively turned her eyes towards the sky—the unrevealing sky, whose depths of unhomed light hide the undiscovered dead of ages—the dead whose time-wearied souls lie in the infinite freshness of Eternity, to rest in the cool shadow of those great unseen Hills, whence cometh our help! She sped her hands and prayed—not for the dead; the quiet dead, who sleep among those mighty mountains of the Lord on whose summit the eternal sunshine broods—but for that other one who was yet her fellow-veller along the flinty ways of a rough and barren world. As she stood thus, rapt

in silent thought, her eyes resting dreamily on the far sky-horizon, it seemed to her that this, his sorrow, brought her nearer to him she loved, that it broke down barriers of space and sense, and allowed her in his need once more to minister to him. Her heart thrilled as though he were actually near—might it not be that their souls—hers and his—were indeed meeting before the Great Father-Presence which binds all humanity in one. She closed her eyes and gave herself for the moment to live in the solemn thought. Then a curtain seemed to roll from before the eyes of her spirit, and she beheld her Kenelm distinctly, as in a vision. There was a look on his face which she had till then never seen on it, a look such as he wore before none save his God and the dead. Yes—the dead! for, with all her senses quickened and transformed by the love, which being of God's Essence makes His creature most like Him, she saw that he stood in a darkened room by the side of a stripped-barbed, and that a tear from his glazed eye had fallen on the cheek of a shrouded corpse. The vision passed suddenly as it had come, and she opened her eyes, and started as she looked round and found herself surrounded by the common sights of home. The door opened at the same moment—someone came in, and handed her a letter. Geraldine, fully alive once more to the present and all that

~~was~~ passing round her, took the letter, and
~~was~~ about to open it. A cry escaped her—
~~the~~ handwriting was his, whom at that
~~moment~~ she knew to be lying dead in the
Wardrobe Room at Rotherhame Castle.

CHAPTER XVII.

The holly by the cottage-eaves,
To-night ungathered shall it stand.
We live within the stranger's land,
And strangely falls our Christmas Eve.

TENNISON.

Think then, my soul, that Death is but a groom
That brings a light into an outer room,
And after bears it nearer to thy sight,
For such advances doth Heaven make in Death."

G. HERBERT.

"HALLO, Bobby! There you are at last!
Pleasant journey, my boy?"

Dr. Bogle was standing in the St. Dunstan's Station, and had just discovered, by the lamp light, his son and heir, who, clad in an ulster down to the heels, was alighting with a yawn upon the platform.

"Not likely to be particularly pleasant on Christmas Eve," he grunted. "They've kept us sticking about at every blessed station till I felt half mad. I kicked up a row at Malton, and told the guard I should complain to the Company. Not a hot-water tin to be got, and a lot of grubby babies in my carriage yelling like so many mad cats."

"You're an hour after time, but better late than never. And so you've taken your degree at last, and now good-bye to old Oxford."

"Yes, and I'm just about glad, too. It

was awful slow last term at Queen's. Just get out of my way, will you, and let me see after my luggage."

The Doctor obediently complied, and by dint of superior vigour in shoving and elbowing, Robert soon contrived to force his way through the thick crowd of holiday-makers that gathered round the luggage-van.

"Just like those nincompoops!" he observed, as he re-emerged, portmanteau in hand, "they've been and left my hat-box behind. It's their own fault entirely, for I saw it labelled. They're going to telegraph at once to Didcot where we changed, so you and I will just wait here and hear the answer."

"Gross carelessness!" ejaculated the Doctor, shivering. He was tired of standing about in the cold draughty station; but on this happy occasion the will of the household Moloch was supreme, and he must go on stamping his feet and rubbing his hands, till such time as Bob's anxieties respecting the missing article were laid at rest.

"Deer from the Castle! Who sends that now?" asked Bob, as his eyes fell upon a pair of antlers, lying with a heap of slaughtered pheasants at a little distance, out of the way of the crowd.

"Bradshaw, to be sure. You know he's been down with us the last two days."

Robert nodded. "Berkeley still alive?" he inquired.

"Still alive, poor fellow, and may hold on.

for days yet, by what the doctor says. Mrs. Bradshaw is a bit put out, for she meant to have brought the little girl there to keep Christmas in style, but what's to be done? It wouldn't do to have grand goings-on with him dying in the house, and life and death are in other hands than ours. Here's the train from London, I declare. It should have been in two hours ago."

Drawing back a few paces out of the way of the fresh influx of passengers, Robert resumed the discussion.

"Car tells me the heiress is awfully fond of the ice," he said. "I hope the girls have been keeping up their skating."

"I sent them to practise this morning, thinking it likely that you would wish to have them as your companions now that you were coming home. The ice on the fish-ponds bore well to-day."

"Stunning!" said Robert, with a click of the tongue. "We must make up parties there with Car and the heiress, and keep out the snobs. A lot of them came up out of the town last winter, and were let in just for sending up their rotten cards."

"Depend on it Mrs. Bradshaw will be select enough," said the Doctor; "and the little lady will be very dependent on us, her connections, for amusement. It will seem odd, won't it, to have a Lady Rotherhame again up at the Castle? To think, too, that the late poor dear woman never had any right

to the name after all! Dolly is given the title merely out of courtesy at present, you know. It will be a long business with the House of Lords before her claim is legally settled."

"It will be no end of an arrangement for us," observed Robert. "The Castle will be a second home for us all. An antiquated parson like old Bradshaw will never be able to look after the shooting for himself. I shall tell him that he had better leave all that sort of thing to me."

"He went over the house systematically yesterday," said the Doctor, "and finally settled about the rooms. Dolly, Anna, and the governess are to be all together in the Keep. He was quite delighted with poor Lady Rotherhame's boudoir—Lady Harold's I should say—the one that was shut up when she died, you know; and he means to have it repainted, and nicely fitted up for Mrs. Bradshaw."

"May I trouble you to let me pass?" said a voice, which, though low, startled Dr. Bogle more than the blare of a trumpet. He drew back with involuntary deference, and the newcomer, lifting his hat in acknowledgment, passed on silently. Bobby was, to use his own expression, "all there" in a moment.

The force of long habit did not make him forget that the some-time Earl was but a detected swindler after all, and the only notice with which he favoured his godfather was a

stare, followed by a careless nod. Sir Kenelm, who, with his former chaplain, had for some moments been endeavouring to pass the pre-occupied pair, returned his stare with a calm gaze and disappeared, followed by the curious eyes of Bob and Dr. Bogle.

"Do you think he heard what we were saying?" asked the Doctor, in a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know, and, what's more, don't care! What business is it of his, pray, what rooms Bradshaw chooses to fit up for his wife? Did you notice that he had a third-class ticket, father?"

"Never!" exclaimed the Doctor, overwhelmed by this crowning token of degradation. "Third-class! that *must* be a hard pill for him to swallow!"

"He'll be swallowing a harder before long," replied Robert, with a snigger. "My eye! how will he look standing in the dock to take his trial?"

"Hush, Bob. Don't seem to make a sport of sin and suffering."

"Why the dickens does he still give himself such ridiculous airs then? He looks as pokerish, and high-and-mighty, as if he were Earl of Rotherham still."

A porter now approached with news of the missing hat-box, and learning it was safe, father and son took their seats in their snug little brougham without further delay. The grey horse started off at a brisk trot along the

frozen road, but so rapidly were their fellow-travellers moving, that the Rectory carriage had well nigh entered the forest gates before it overtook the two tall figures which on foot were wending their swift and silent way.

The red sun had sunk behind the snow-clad hills, but still a ruddy hue glowed in the western sky, and fell warmly on the untrodden, dazzling waste. There was the peculiar silence in the air that snow always brings, as though the earth were lying dead beneath the wondrous, wide-spread pall. How gracefully it lay, piled up on the dark branches of pine and fir! how weirdly white were the woodland glades! how plaintive the clear pipe of the redbreast on the air! Avoiding the deeper drifts on one side of their path, and the line of ice which on the other marked the channel of a once rapid stream, Sir Kenelm and his companion hastened on to the home which was soon to be their home no longer. The grey mass of towers rose solemnly against the northern sky, and from the gloomy, lifeless windows shone no gleam of fire or candle-light to quicken the steps of the weary travellers. But still they walked on at breathless speed, for time, more precious than gold, was falling through the hour-glass, and within those silent walls the sands of a human life were fast running out. Was the Dark Angel already there? Was it the shadow of his outstretched wings that spread about the old house that peculiar atmosphere of forbidding

gloom, which seemed to shut it off in sinister isolation from the lowly, cheerful habitations at its base? The fear, though in the minds of both, remained unspoken, and passionately as he yearned for tidings of the child whom he had left yesterday exhausted with ceaseless suffering, Sir Kenelm made no effort to obtain earlier information, and waited to hear his fate from lips which he could feel sure were yet kind and friendly. A memory of the last Christmas Eve, on which he had driven his boy away from the children's festival, telling him that he could find no pleasure in it if he were there—the first of a long series of unkindnesses—grieved the father's heart, and seemed by its ruder misery to violate the sacredness of his heaven-sent sorrow.

In the streets of St. Dunstan's, Sir Kenelm had met several former acquaintances, but the townsfolk avoided him as if there were contamination in his contact, and Lord Fitzcharles, who had unexpectedly encountered him by the post-office, had passed by, turning his head another way. Who would wish to own acquaintance with a man who would soon be wearing the loathsome convict-livery? Kenelm Harold did not wonder that he was put into quarantine by the world which had been at his feet, and he was stronger to bear his social ostracism now that, instead of being upheld by unbending pride alone, a calm, unhoping resignation had come to aid him. He had bowed himself to the Will of Heaven, and

the million-barbed tongues of human contempt and hatred could no longer wound him with a mortal wound. They sounded distant and confused, a wild hubbub of hardly understood jargon, falling within the stillness of that inner tabernacle, where God hides His fugitives from the strife of tongues.

"The children will miss the freedom of their native woods and heaths," he said at last, breaking the long silence. "What will you do with them all day, Daubeney, I wonder? I fear you will find them a constant anxiety, at all events till they have been weaned from their dependent habits."

"Such a trouble will be sweet to me," returned Daubeney. "Think what a refreshment I shall find it on coming in from a day's toil among 'the great unwashed,' to see my solitary home brightened with those dear, fair little faces; and close to us will lie the old river, ever ready to bear us away for an hour's recreation among less squalid scenes."

"Money is required for that, and even in its humblest form I have come to find that money is not always forthcoming. The potent power of this material deity, which divides the Empire of the World with God, I never fully realised till now, when I know not where to turn to get my dying boy the small comforts that he needs."

"I don't think he has found out your difficulty; almost all his little wishes have been gratified, and I am certain he is quite

unconscious that the household is feeling the pinch of want. It is indeed hard for any one to believe it in that house, and with plenty all around."

"Like the waters of the salt sea, which the thirsty sailor dares not drink," said Sir Kenelm. "One cannot expect charity from those one has injured, and I am afraid even the shelter of a roof is grudged my poor boy by Lady Rotherhame's representatives. It is a horrible thought to me, Daubeney, that I have no hope of repaying the debt I owe her, and my helplessness in this respect is one of the worst trials I have to bear."

"There is nothing to complain of," answered Daubeney with gentle severity. "It is no hardship that we should have to suffer the natural consequence of our wrong-doing. Still in the present case you have the comfort of knowing that the one you have wronged will suffer no lasting injury. She has enough and to spare of this world's goods, and will never miss the few thousands you are unable to repay her. Your own pride will be the chief sufferer, and wounds to pride are healing things, helping to do to death the unnatural earth-born monster Self, which we are too apt to elevate into a fetish for our worship."

"I am more than half afraid of this wholesale spiritual weeding you prescribe," said Sir Kenelm, with a laugh that had a dismal ring. "I fear my vices form such a very

large proportion of my personality, that when, by dint of rooting and stamping out they are all got rid of, there will be very little left of me, and I should enter the next world the mere shade of the shadow of a man, hardly recognisable by myself even, a distilled essence of insipid rose-water—a kind of Bowdlerised Edition, without salt or savour.”

Daubeny smiled at hearing him run on in something of his old strain.

“I don’t think there is much fear of *your* losing your individuality,” he answered, “but at all events, Pride is well out of the way. It is an ugly, self-sufficient, self-contemplating thing, and it degrades the true dignity of the human soul by withdrawing it from the worship of the Highest, to admire and bow down before its own imperfect self.”

“I don’t grant you the self-admiration,” returned his companion. “A man may recognise that he is ugly, poor, low-born, stupid, and yet may be the very devil for pride. I can truly say that I have never admired myself. Yet I am proud, with a pride which remains untouched now that I have lost all, and am become a derision and outcast among men.”

“I know of but one cure for a disease so deeply rooted,” said Daubeny. “It is to contemplate the Son of God, crowned with thorns, and bearing infamy upon a Cross.”

Sir Kenelm made no reply, and the two passed silently under the shadow of the old

home. It was growing dark, but the snow-light made the path clear before them, and in the sharp air the church bells burst suddenly into a sonorous peal. They were ringing for the service of Christmas Eve, and in the falling twilight the outline of the village church was dimly to be seen, the lights within showing the blurred figures in the painted windows. The bells clashed and jangled with a weird outburst of festal mirth, but to one oppressed heart, in which all Christmas joy seemed dead for ever, they brought no thought of peace or salvation, but fell with a dull, crushing vibration, which spoke merely of the churchyard, the dank, dark graves ever yawning for fresh occupants, the Conqueror Worm, and the Blast which shall awaken Man to hear his Final Doom.

The clash of the bells followed the two men, till entering the Great Hall, the heavy door closed behind them and shut out the jubilant tumult of sound.

The interior of the Castle wore an air of desertion. Ashes lay cold and grey on the once hospitable hearth, packing cases were piled on the carpetless floors, and a half-open door afforded a glimpse of the dismantled library, in which carpenters and masons had been hard at work. Pictures had been taken down, and the furniture, moved from its accustomed places, lay in shrouded heaps in the middle of the room. The house was in a transition state, palpably

passing out of old hands into new. But when the hour of rest had come, the workmen left their tools and gone home, and the only living creatures that stirred in the empty galleries were the old house-dogs, who, disturbed at the unwonted aspect of their familiar haunts, promenaded uneasily and down with low growls and shuffling feet. The place seemed already to know its former master no more, and his steps as he traversed the dark empty Hall, had a stealthy sound, like those of an intruder. Some accustomed faces were still to be seen among the servants, but they, having already transferred allegiance to the new *régime*, kept aloof in exclusive dignity from the fallen master who had lost his respectability, and had now barely money enough to pay for the common necessities of life. There were some tender-hearted of his former household who preferred seeking employment elsewhere, but those who remained, witnessing the downfall of the family they had served, and such domestic services were required by the invalid and the languid ladies were performed by the faithful maids. Weedon, assisted by Miss Oliver, who absolutely refused to leave them as long as a use-room could be found for her. Her relations, ashamed to sever abruptly and entirely his connection with a master who had shown him so much kindness, occasionally volunteered some gratuitous attentions. A gleam of firelight flickered on the rough

wall of the Ruby Tower. It came from the half-open door of the sick room, and pausing on the threshold, Sir Kenelm gazed upon a scene of peace and cheerful warmth. The simple homelike chamber had put on something even of a festal air, for the pictures and tall eight-day clock were crowned with holly, and mistletoe hung from the middle of the ceiling. A little round table was drawn up before the fire, on which lay a number of Ralph's childish possessions. Edward and Cicely stood on either side of Lettice, who was telling them a fairy-tale, and on the couch, in the full blaze of the fire, lay he, in whose honour every bright or pretty thing that still belonged to them had been brought together here by the loving thought of his kindred. There he lay, surrounded by tokens of tenderest care, yet, as the blanched boyish hand and pinched features too plainly showed, fast making ready to leave them all, lured forth into the Dark Unknown by a mysterious spirit-fascination, from whose voiceless summons thick walls and loving hands were powerless to hold him back. Strange is the solitude of that sleep which is slept on the verge of the grave, the sleep which at any moment may glide unperceived into Death !

Lettice sprang up when she saw her father, and putting her finger on her lips, lifted her little blooming cheek for him to kiss.

"He has rallied, father !" she whispered,

‘isn’t that good news? O, how cold your hands are! Come and warm them by the fire. Hush children! you will wake Ralph with your noise.’

“He looks certainly better than he did yesterday,” said Sir Kenelm, returning the caresses of the little ones with his ordinary gentle, rather frigid, kiss, and bending with loving eyes over his unconscious boy. The distinct outline of the temples and cheekbone, and the strange thinness of the lips, scared him; but he eagerly sought refuge in the reflection that the look of acute suffering had passed away, and that Ralph’s rest was calm and happy.

“‘So He giveth His beloved sleep!’” said Mr. Daubeny dreamily.

“The best gift He could give if only it might be eternal!” said Sir Kenelm rather bitterly. “As Hamlet says, ‘Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.’”

“Is it better to go downward to the dust like a beast, than to wake up after God’s likeness?” asked Daubeny.

“I am inclined to think so, when I remember that God suffered,” returned Sir Kenelm wearily, as he averted his eyes from the wan boy-face, and stood beside the fire. ‘But here is someone who does not approve of long faces on Christmas Eve,’ he added, twining his long fingers in Cicely’s curls. ‘What fun are you getting up for to-morrow, my little girl?’”

"Roast beef and plum-pudding!" interrupted Edward promptly. "Daddy, it's a shame that we are not to have a turkey, for the servants have got two beauties. I saw the scullery-maid picking them to-day in the yard."

"It'll be the first time I can ever *member* having Christmas dinner in a bedroom," whispered Cicely. "We used to have it down in the Great Hall with all the servants, didn't we? But this year we are going away, and everything looks untidy, so Ralph says we must dine up here with him."

"Mr. Bradshaw was asked by Parsons, my Lord, whether he'd come up here to-morrow and dine in the Great Hall with the servants according to the old custom," said Mrs. Weedon, coming in at this moment with a basin of gruel in her hands. "His Reverence was kind enough to say he wouldn't, not this once, lest the noise should be bad for the 'poor young fellow in the Ruby Tower!' Fellow! that he should venture to call his Lordship *fellow* indeed to his own servant!—the nasty, low-born, impudent, canting hypocrite!"

"Hush, hush, Granny," said Sir Kenelm soothingly. "You know I don't like to see that cross look on your kind old face. What have you got there—gruel? Doesn't it remind me of the old days when you used to come stealing into the darkened room to which my mother's commands had consigned my starv-

ing person, and cheer me up with a smoking bowl of bread and milk!"

"O fly, my Lord, fly," whispered the old woman, overcome by this allusion to the childhood of her idolised nursling. "As soon as ever the breath is out of his precious body get away and hide yourself, and trust me to get to you with the children somehow, even if you be at the ends o' the earth. Was it for *this*," she went on, the tears running down her wrinkled cheeks, "that I fed you from my own bosom, and nursed and loved you into life when the doctors thought each breath must be your last, and you used to look up at me with your big baby eyes as though to beg me to take away your pain? Was it for *this* I watched you night and day, and taught you to walk, and measured you each year as you shot up like one of them tall lilies down in garden, and heard you your little lessons, and . . . and . . . ?"

"Dear faithful soul, more my mother than she who bore me!" replied Sir Kenelm, with quivering lips. "Mother, you must forgive me that I cannot do as you bid me. Mr. Daubeny would remind you that the Saints have been in prison, and what am I that after such an evil life as mine I should refuse to bear a little shame? And now see, the children are puzzled by your tears. Go and dry your eyes, and come back and talk to us by the fire—you would not spoil their little time of pleasure, I know."

Mrs. Weedon obeyed, and left the room, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. But the sound of her sobs had disturbed the sleeper, and Ralph, thus suddenly aroused, started up and looked about him with a scared expression, as though terrified by the weakness which in slumber he had forgotten.

"You know me, do you not, my boy?" said his father, turning to him with a cheerful smile.

Whatever secret heart-sinkings had assailed him during these last protracted weeks of alternating fear and hope, he had never once betrayed a desponding thought while his son's eyes were upon him, and Ralph had learned to associate with his father ideas only of reassuring brightness and support.

"Oh, yes, my own father!" he exclaimed, as with sudden strength he threw his thin arms passionately round Sir Kenelm's neck. "I have been longing for you to come back and see how much better I am. The doctor says himself that I am stronger to-day, doesn't he, Lettice? so now, you see, you need not have worried yourself about leaving me."

"That's too long a speech!" said his father, as a tearing cough interrupted Ralph's eager words. "I have been wretched all through the journey from London, fancying I should find you very bad, so you may believe me it was like new life to be met by Lettice's good tidings. I hope you didn't

talk too much in my absence," he added anxiously. "Don't you remember how I used to tell you you were a good boy on the whole, but that you had two faults—a long nose and a longer tongue?"

"He only talked a little, while he was dividing his treasures," said Cicely, climbing on to her father's knee. "Look, he has given me his splendid gilt coach and his little table. Isn't it nice?" and she laughed gleefully.

A spasm of pain contracted Sir Kenelm's features, and he made a movement as if to put her down.

Ralph's watchful eyes were upon him, and he interposed smiling.

"Giving away one's things needn't kill one off hand any more than making one's will, father."

"True," said Sir Kenelm, the shadow on his face giving way to sunshine with an April rapidity of transition. "While there's life there's hope, and you are so much better to-night, so like your old self, that I see no reason why you shouldn't pull through yet. People worse than you have recovered before now!"

"Do you think so? How wonderful if I should be well again after all!" Ralph answered, raising himself, with a strange kindling of the eyes.

Once he had longed to die, to be rid of

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the heart-sore that was worse than death, and the grave had seemed to him a haven of placid rest. But now Life looked on him with smiling lips, and, cradled in warmth and love, he felt unwilling to go out alone into the Dark.

"Indeed I do!" his father was replying earnestly, when a look in his boy's eyes stopped him. They were fastened on him eagerly, but there was in them a *something* which those know well who have watched the approach of death—the strange, homeless, intense look of a soul whose house is falling in ruins about it, and which prepares to take its flight.

In the depth of the father's heart there arose then the dull certainty that his child would die, but he crushed it down, and tried to believe the cheering words with which he answered that imploring glance.

"You may never be very strong again, Ralph," he said; "but you wouldn't care to go out and battle with the rough world, would you? I should like to feel that you were at home, looking after Edward and your sisters, when—"

Neither father nor son ever spoke openly of the separation the future must bring between Sir Kenelm and his children. This slight allusion was almost the first expression Sir Kenelm had given to that ever-present thought.

Ralph's lips contracted, and he was

struggling to frame an answer, when Mr. Daubeney said soothingly—

“Don’t let us trouble ourselves about the future; we are in the hands of God, Whose Will be done!”

“Will you come to supper?” said Lettice, appearing at the door. “We have just got it ready, and if Ralph were to rest a little now we might come back and sit with him afterwards.”

When the meal was over, and the little party had returned to the sick-room, they found Ralph in bed, whence he had superintended arrangements for their comfortable accommodation. Easy-chairs and stools were ranged round the fire, the table was pushed back, the flames roared cheerily up the chimney. In the far distance, through the silence of the snowy night, the hoarse voices of village carollers could be faintly heard, and once a drum and fife band from St. Dunstan’s passed at no great distance. But bands and singers alike seemed to avoid the Castle as though there were something uncanny in its towers, and the little group within, shunned by the world, gathered the closer together, to keep with what cheerfulness they might their last Christmas round the old hearth. None cared to look forward through the thick night of ignorance to future Christmas Eves, though the thought would sometimes rise unbidden, “How next year shall we

be sundered, who now sit hand in hand !”
But—

Who would not in Life's dreary waste,
Snatch when he could with eager haste,
Some interval of joy ?

And thus, turning aside from sad forebodings, Sir Kenelm and his children gave themselves up to enjoy the bliss of being together. They talked much of old days ; family jokes, long dropped, revived, and stories, half forgotten, of past experiences, were recalled once more. Since his confession, the ice which had bound up the memory of his wife within Sir Kenelm's heart had wonderfully thawed. He could bear to speak of her since his own deed had opened out to him the hope of one day returning to her side, and he was now anxious to leave with his children thoughts of their mother, to be their guardian angels in the time when he also should be taken from them. Though all were oppressed with a vague prophetic instinct of coming change and parting, there was but one among Sir Kenelm's children who was conscious that two short months hence their “head might be taken from them” to live in hard and shameful bondage. But we see things with different eyes when the world is behind us, and with “Eternity, in all its calm majesty, rising before him,” Ralph could already feel that the worst bitterness had passed out of his proud father's coming fate. He gazed on

and with love as he lay back on his pillows, looked on one dear face after another with opening, clinging tenderness, and sometimes joined a little in the cheerful talk. So warm and bright was that hour of social intercourse that none dreamed it would be the last—the last between them and Ralph—before the Great Silence.

At ten o'clock Sir Kenelm's watchful eye detected a slight, weary droop in the sick man's eyelids.

"This time is like a pleasant dream; one reluctant to let it go," he said regretfully, "but I hope we shall have just such another to-morrow, and every evening when Ralph is strong enough to bear our noise. So bid you gone, my children, and warm yourselves well by the sitting-room fire before you go to bed."

Mr. Daubeny said a few prayers by the bedside, and then father and son were left together in the darkened chamber, Sir Kenelm seated by Ralph's side, and holding his hand with a fast, firm clasp.

CHAPTER XVIII.

How pleasant are thy paths, O Death,
From sin to pleasing God !
For the pardoned in thy land are bright
As innocence in robe of white,
And walk in the same road.

FABER.

THERE was silence in the room, broken only by Ralph's difficult breathing. Every power was failing, and the languid blood flowed dull and cold, but the heart was straining its utmost to perform its needful task—the poor young heart which throughout the last year of trial had swelled almost to bursting with stormy emotions, painfully suppressed ; which had throbbed with apprehension, or sunk low in deep despair. Brave, strong heart, which had borne up through all, and which now, worn out before its time, was about to be laid aside as a valueless and used up thing to moulder into dust !

SIR Kenelm watched in the dull firelight the wasted face upon the warm, soft pillow, and thought with cold wonder how this frame, which he could now touch and see, would soon be shut away from him, low beneath the grass, where he could never reach it. How soon his boy-companion of eighteen years would be to him an idea, a memory only, like her for whose presence he had languished with a five-years' fruitless thirst.

"Oh, that I had been kinder to you while I had you!" he murmured, inwardly, and then, as his eye caught the faint, blue scar which disfigured the dying boy's cheek, he groaned aloud! "Oh! that God had spared him till that mark was gone! Can I see it on his face when he is dead, and live?"

He looked down at the white hand that had dealt the blow, so white and yet so cruel, and dashed it against the iron bed-post.

Some minutes later the quiet was broken by a restless movement from the bed. Sir Kenelm kept silence, hoping that Ralph might fall asleep again; but his breathing continued to show that he was awake, and at last, bending over him, Sir Kenelm found that tears, which he vainly sought to hide, were stealing slowly from under his half-closed eyelids.

"What is it, my own dear, patient saint?" he asked, with passionate tenderness.

It was the first time during all his long decline that he had seen Ralph's fortitude give way.

"I want to live; I *cannot* die!" he answered, and a tempest of sobs shook his frame.

His father's heart sank. Till now he had been supported by the belief that Ralph was resigned to go.

"My boy," he said with difficulty, "life is not worth such regret.

It is better to die than to live!
It is sweeter to sleep than to grieve!"

"But I am too young for that. I don't want sleep yet. The others will be near," he went on, in broken sentences, "to help and comfort you, and I shall be out of it all. It is hard, for none of them can love you as I love you. I haven't been a good son; I have deceived and disobeyed you; I haven't done half I might for you all these years—and now—it is too late—too late!"

"I could almost wish you had been a worse son, Ralph, that I might loathe myself less, but instead of that you have given me more than life—you have been the saving of my soul!"

Ralph checked his sobs like a babe who is distracted from its grief by a sudden note of music.

"O, but father," he began again presently, in a tone which, if less wild, was still painfully agitated, "I disappointed all your expectations. I didn't grow up the least what you hoped I should, I was dull and awkward, selfish and unsympathetic to you, let alone worse faults. Can you forgive it all? Tell me!"

"Ah! Ralph," said his father, smiling mournfully, "how little you know that by each generous humble word, you are forging knives to cut my heart when we are parted. Yes, I do forgive all the offences you have ever committed against me, though—I will hide nothing from you—even now sometimes when my thoughts travel back into the past—

ghosts of my old frenzies rise up again within me. But one look at your face is potent as the sign of the Cross, to drive away all such tormenting spectres. Long after the storm has passed, the waves heave with the panting of the spent tempest—they go down at last, and there comes the stillness of a great calm.”

“I understand,” said Ralph, with comprehending sympathy. “When death has come, and driven away all earthly elements of pain and anger, you will be able to think of me with perfect kindness.”

“I do already, with a sorrow and love no words can utter,” said Sir Kenelm, earnestly. “Do not misunderstand me, I am not so unnatural as still to have any lingering elements of bitterness in my thoughts of you. But when for years one has yielded to the domination of the Evil One, he does not resign his prey without a struggle.”

“O, my father, my father, how can I bear to leave you! Others will see you smile and hear you talk, and I shall be away—alone.”

“But you go to your mother, my child,” said Sir Kenelm, shading his eyes with his hand, “and she will never be cold or hard to you as I have been.”

The words struck some deep chord in the boy’s heart, he lay still with a strange yearning in his eyes. “And to God, Who is Love,” he whispered, solemnly.

“Yes,” said Sir Kenelm. And he added

with difficulty, for to his jealous love it was hard to admit any claim stronger than his own: "God was your friend when I forsook you. He has a better right to you than I."

"He made you, and so I know He must be sweet," answered Ralph, tenderly. "I go to Him with confidence, only I know I shall feel sad when I see Him, for I shall think how often I have grieved His heart, and paid back His patient love with hard ingratitude."

"In your love for Him, don't forget me quite!" said Sir Kenelm, feverishly, as he marked by the intent rapt look, that Ralph saw and desired Another more than himself. "Remember," he went on, speaking fast and indistinctly, and looking aside, as if he could not meet even those dying eyes, "I am going to a life where men are used but as machines to perform such and such an average of slavish manual labour—where the brain is left unoccupied to feed upon itself, an empty house, swept and garnished, prey to any fearful delusion that wills to take up its abode therein. You must intercede for me when you are with the God you love, that the horror of unavailing remorse may not drive me to some fresh sin."

Ralph shuddered, and looked at him with anguished questioning.

"Remorse!" he repeated, trying to still his quivering voice to speak the calm accents of reason. "Why, my own father, should

You feel remorse, when you have undone the **only** wrong you ever did? Surely it is **nothing** about me that troubles you. Never, **till** I alienated you by my own fault, did you **say** so much as an angry word to me. The **joy** and pride I have felt in you is such as few **sons** could understand. Heaven will not be **all** Heaven to me till you are there, till I **have** both you and mother together, as in the blessed old days."

"But there is another!" and Sir Kenelm's frame shook, as bending down he shaded his face with his hand. "Ralph, *her* face, with all the light and colour gone, haunts me night and day. If you could have seen her as I have, her eyes radiant with joy and undoubting faith, you would know that, as regards her, I must for ever have the conscience of a murderer. Yes, I know it only too well, that unmistakable look of love. It is the fever of the heart, for which there is no cure. Thank Heaven! you at least have never felt the inner scorching of those consuming flames, which, when their natural food is taken from them, feed on upon the heart that gave them birth, till they have eaten out its core."

"You loved my mother like that," said Ralph, "how much you have had to suffer! And yet you must go on living, while God lets me die."

There was silence in the room again, and as Sir Kenelm still kept his face buried in his

hands, Ralph gazed on him with solemn yearning tenderness, as some pitying angel might watch the struggles of the human soul it is appointed to tend.

"And did *you* love Geraldine?" he asked, at length, in serious thoughtful accents.

"As a friend, a child, a sister, yes!" answered his father, suddenly raising his eyes. "At first I merely liked her, admired her beauty, and found interest and refreshment in her society. Then, when you were gone, and God and my Mary seemed parted from me by an impassable chasm, I first discovered that she loved me. I could not bring myself to break her heart, and thought her companionship would distract me from the maddening hankering after what I had lost. So I asked her to be my wife—partly out of pity, partly out of revenge on you, partly out of my own need of some fresh object for which to live. Then only did I come to know her really, Ralph; she wound herself about me with a thousand clinging tendrils, soft and strong. She became my friend, and friendship is a thing less passionate, less intoxicating, but pure, enduring, and heaven-born as love. She trusted me, she looked up to me with reverence as her teacher, with inscrutable devotion as her idol, and I—betrayed her. Never shall I forget the hour we parted; she uttered no word of reproach, but looked at me with an expression like that of the first hare I ever

shot. Now, while I have you to watch and cherish, my precious boy, I can shake off at times the piteous memory of that meek, stricken face, but when you are gone, when all my children are taken from me, I shall be left with it alone, and it will come relentlessly, and pursue me into madness! Can you wonder," he added, and he closed his eyes as though to shut out a dreaded sight, "that I fear the future, and that to escape from the phantom which no power can lay, I long for annihilation? Death, in the ordinary Christian sense of departure from the world, offers me no relief! 'If I climb up to Heaven Thou art there, if I go down to hell Thou art there also!' And where God is, there, even for the pardoned human soul which has inflicted incurable injury on another, must be torment and remorse. I do not blame Him as I used; we entail such miseries by a just and natural sequence on ourselves, and to be more insensible would be to be more unlike Him. But I do long to resign my ruined soul into His hands, and to lay down this bruised, struggling, suffering life, in the quiet dust of senseless forgetfulness."

"O, God forbid!" exclaimed Ralph, his weak hands shaking with feverish agitation. "He has a cure for every evil—in another life, if not in this. It is written that in heaven all tears shall be wiped away, and then, when *she* is happy once more, you will be happy

too, father, both she and you at the feet of the Redeemer. This life is but a brief hour in the long years of eternity—it will soon close for her—for you both.”

He lay still some minutes harassed—dissatisfied with the comfort he had suggested. Suddenly an idea seemed to flash into his eyes, and raising himself on his elbow, he turned towards his father—

“I am getting rather done up now, I am afraid,” he said, “and want to go to sleep. But first I should like to see Lettice for a few minutes. She always comes in two or three times in the night, so she won’t mind your calling her.”

The sudden failure and weakness of his tone alarmed Sir Kenelm, and he hastily called Lettice from the adjoining room. He wished to stay with them, but Ralph was so persistent that he should take some rest, that he was obliged to consent to lie down for an hour or two.

“Kiss me before I go, my own, own boy,” he said, bending low over the pillow. “I have been thoughtless to talk to you so much, and tire you.”

Ralph opened his arms wide, and flinging them round his neck, pressed his faded lips to his cheek.

For the first time at that moment the thought of his last Christmas Eve came back upon Ralph with all the bitterness gone out of it. He remembered his vision of that night,

and a new light shone upon it. It seemed to him as if it had been sent in mercy to make the other Life more real—to warn him, whose earthly years, unconsciously to himself, had then already well nigh run to their limit, that he must put away the reckless confidence of youth, and prepare himself to die. On the threshold of the eternal world the problems of life become luminous, we read their explanation between the lines. The secret of the labyrinth is almost out.

Sir Kenelm turned at the door, and once more looked back lingeringly towards the beloved form upon the bed, and as he saw it resting on the soft pillows, surrounded by signs of love and watchful care, the thought once more recurred that soon his Ralph would be locked away from him in one of earth's dark treasure-chambers, with all her sleeping plants and precious things that wait for spring.

When his father was gone, Ralph insisted that Lettice should bring him a strong reviving draught, and then, buoyed up by the stimulant, he begged her to give him a pencil and sheet of writing paper. Lettice entreated him to give up the idea, but finding that his whole heart was set upon it, she yielded, and sat by tremblingly, watching his shaking hand, as one after another he traced the unsteady characters. It was an effort almost more than he could bear, but he persisted bravely, and himself directed the

envelope to "Miss Egerton, The Rectory, Grantham." The letter which took so long to write, contained but a few words, and was as follows:—

"I have heard it said that nothing is refused to the dying. Do you love my father, Geraldine? If so, I speak to one who understands me, who feels, as I do, that the most suffering life endured with him, is better than any existence apart. When this reaches you I may be already gone, and then, left alone, I *know* remorse will drive him mad. He thinks of you with love and agony continually. I leave it to you to save him, as you only can. It is a sacred trust, and from the other side of the grave I shall await your fulfilment of it. God bless you.

"RALPH HAROLD."

"To Miss Egerton, Ralph?" said Lettice doubtfully, as she took the letter from his pale fingers. "Should you have written to *her*?"

"Yes, yes!" he answered, excitedly, — love for his father, which had been his childish passion, shutting out even the suspicion that he was doing a questionable thing. "I have written only what was absolutely necessary. Let no one but herself see it, and promise me that it shall be posted to-morrow, and that you will give it only into hands that you can safely trust. And now kiss me, sweetest sister, and go to bed. Don't trouble about me, I shall be asleep before you have left the room."

"Good-night, dear old boy," answered Lettice, sealing his brow with kisses so cool and fresh that they fell like dew upon his burning skin. "To-morrow we are going to see mother's letters to papa, you know."

"To-morrow, yes, to-morrow!" he answered, dreamily, and Lettice, as she left him in charge of Mrs. Weedon, who had come down to take her turn in nursing, paused on the threshold, and cast a last look back. Her brother had turned upon his side, and with his cheek nestling in his hand, a habit which had grown up with him from babyhood, had already fallen asleep. Lettice thanked God, and with feelings of renewed hope, very sweet after the despondency of the last few days, went to her cold bedroom, and lay down shivering, to dream that her brother was well again, and that she was playing cricket with him on the bowling-green.

CHAPTER XIX.

The hour of woe and separation,
The hour of falling tears is this,
Him that so lately was among us,
For the last time of all we kiss.

Up to the grave to be surrendered,
Sealed with the monumental stone,
A dweller in the house of darkness,
Amidst the dead to lie alone.

NEALE.—(*Translated*).

In the middle of the night the wind arose, coming from its home in the far North, where great whales plunge icily through Polar seas, and green icebergs raise their sharp peaks towards the shuddering sky, and screamed with harsh, cutting violence round the strong old Castle, driving the snow-flakes hither and thither in bewildering mazy dance, disturbing the sleepers, and filling them with vague alarms. Sound and silence are alike awfully suggestive to the light slumbers and overstrained nerves of dwellers in a house of sickness. Who has not known them? the sudden wakings, the starts of dismay, the mysterious panics that assail the heart when the King of Terrors is awaited! But when he tarries long, and the straining ear, hour after hour, can catch no coming sound of chariot wheels from the distant hills, the soul becomes, as it were, naturalized to an attitude of expectation, and it seems impossible that

end shall ever come to the long recurring
und of hope and fear, rally and relapse.
nd so it was that when, with the first cold
wn of Christmas morning, the tidings roused
e household that the Dark Angel had come
last, a general sense of consternation
veiled ; the long-expected hour took them
r surprise. Hastily they huddled on
eir clothes in the dim half-light, and
e children with overawed faces clung
ently to Lettice as she entered their
other's room. No more rallyings now, no
ore suspense, no more struggles of hope
ainst despair, no more care, or sympathy,
warmth, or pain of life. He lay propped
his pillows, struggling in the fetters of
ortality. A sorrowing group stood round,
eir gaze concentrated on his face, but in his
es there was a strange unconsciousness of
em and of their anguish ; among them all
was alone. Already he seemed to belong
them no more, called forth from the number
the Living to dwell among the Dead. Sir
enelm stood by the bed, and his face wore
look unwonted and awful to his children's
pealing eyes. He was steeling his soul to
ce that which must be faced, nerving him-
lf to see his first-born die, and his lips were
le and stern. The servants stood by with
arful faces, listening to the laboured
tling breathing, but they drew back that
e young children might gather together at
eir dying brother's side. He could no

longer speak, but turned his eyes upon them in dumb anguish, as though asking for the help they could not give. For some moments it seemed that none would dare to break the dreadful silence, but at last Parsons, noting the staring eyes of the poor frightened children, whispered them to kiss their brother and go away.

"Let them stay," said Sir Kenelm, hoarsely. "No one shall desert him now."

Parsons dared say no more, although his judgment was strongly against exposing such young children to the ordeal of assisting at the last agony, and again they all stood round speechless and inactive, no holy words sounding in the room to lift sinking hearts above material death and ruin. Mrs. Weedon, as she supported the dying boy in her arms, and wiped the death-sweat from his brow, at last broke the spell, and bade Parsons "set the door open, that the soul might pass more easily."

Then Mr. Daubeny entered hurriedly. He had been soundly sleeping towards the dawn, and had felt no consciousness of the Angel's noiseless tread, as, over the snow-clad earth, he drew near to still the beating heart in his cold, strong grasp. Awakened by Miss Oliver, the chaplain had dressed in haste, and now, as he came in, a long-drawn sigh of relief passed round the fearful group; they were glad to see a clergyman among them. One glance at the face upon the bed

was enough for Daubeny; *the change* had come, that mysterious change defying definition, the Seal of God upon Life's finished book, the dashing of the first cold spray from the Eternal Ocean. He bent over the dying, and spoke a few words in the half-dulled ear. A look of intense solemnity came into Ralph's eyes. He made a sign of acquiescence, and almost immediately his breathing grew quieter, and he lay gazing gravely on the mourners round his bed.

"Make ready!" said the clergyman, turning to the servants. "Let us send him forth into the Dark Valley strengthened by Christ's Last Sacrament."

The preparations were quickly made. Ralph's cross, his mother's gift, which had lain by his side all through his illness, was placed before him; the solemn tapers were lighted to cheer the eyes now darkening fast, and all together, for the last time in this world, the father and his children received the Heavenly Food. "Still, sacred hour, peace in the midst of pain!" when, as the curtain lifts to receive the departing spirit into the Holy of Holies, the watchers in the Temple's Outer Court catch, as it were, an echo of the mighty harmonies of adoration from soul-lips within the Veil! And could it be that from the Heavenly Cloister, where she prayed for them, their mother's spirit had come forth to meet her beloved ones on the dim borderland on which

they trod? Well might she be there, with "nameless offices of love," to soothe her fainting child, to take him from his father's arms, to bind up his weary feet, bleeding from the sharp thorns of life, and lead him to the Still Pastures of Everlasting Peace.

When the last rites were ended, Daubeny still prayed softly. Ralph looked from one to another of the kneeling group, with a smile of ineffable sweetness and farewell. Suddenly a terrible struggle began—he threw up his hands and fought for breath. His weakness was so great that it seemed impossible the deadly conflict with the Mighty Unseen Foe should long continue. Yet moment after moment it was protracted, and every moment seemed an hour of concentrated torture to those who loved and were powerless to help him.

"Oh, Daubeny! this is more than I ~~can~~ bear," said Sir Kenelm, in a choking voice. "Pray, pray, that he may die!"

"Go to him," whispered Daubeny, "you will endure it better if you are touching him."

Sir Kenelm stooped and lifted once more in his arms the convulsed boyish frame. It may be that the struggle had exhausted itself, or that his father's touch soothed him, as the touch of those we love alone ~~can~~ soothe, but the spasms gradually grew less, and Ralph leaned against his father's shoulder, panting and spent.

"Kiss your mother for me, Ralph!" whispered his father, presently. "Good-bye, my precious, precious child!"

Ralph tried to speak, but his utterance was failing, and the one word "God" was alone intelligible. He struggled to lift his hand and stroke his father's hair, but finding that the power was gone, he looked up in his face with a gaze that said more than words—long, rapt, intense, sublime. The light of intelligence faded as he looked, slowly and perceptibly, and the eyes became glazed.

"He is going," whispered the old nurse, shuddering.

"To Christ's embrace!" said Mr. Daubeney.

There was a silence, and Sir Kenelm felt the slight form he held grow heavier. He looked at his boy's face. The eyes were wide open, and the lips parted, but the breathing had ceased. He had died in his father's arms.

Sir Kenelm laid him gently back upon the pillow, and kissed his lips. Then the on-lookers saw for the first time that the dreaded moment was past—that Ralph was dead.

The first moments of death,—though in them, as in a seed, lies all the growing infinity of parting,—do not palpably cut off all communication between the living and the dead; so long as the corpse is yet warm with the recent ebb and flow of the life-blood, it seems to be no thing of dread.

The little group remained motionless upon their knees; none wished to be the first to break the spell, or turn away to earth from the closing doors of Paradise. At last Parsons, oppressed by the remembrance that there were practical duties to be performed, rose softly from his knees, and drawing near with an air of subdued solemnity, stretched out his hand towards the dead boy. But Sir Kenelm laid fingers of iron on his arm, and as the officious valet drew back startled, rose and stood gazing on his son's face. Then stooping, as though in sad apology for the deed he was about to do, he imprinted one passionate kiss upon the sightless eyes, and shrouded them beneath their soft lids to everlasting sleep.

"Farewell!" he said, mechanically; and Daubeny added: "'Until the day break, and the shadows flee away.'"

A low sound of sobs now rose. Edward and Cicely were standing with their arms about each others' necks, their small golden heads pressed together in the hopeless grief of childhood. Daubeny looked tenderly upon the weeping children.

"My little ones," he said, "you must not grieve for Ralph. All pain is over now, and thanks to our Blessed Saviour, Who died that we might live, he is alive again in Paradise, stronger and happier than he ever was before. Let us all kneel down once more, and pray for our dear boy—ours still,

though he is gone where we cannot follow him."

All knelt, except the father, who standing beside the child that no longer could see nor hear him, held both his hands in a desperate grasp, as if he would never let them go. Dully the thought loomed through his brain, that even *this* would be taken from him, this motionless, sightless frame—all that was left him of his Ralph—and he stood close by, as if to shield it from the violating touch of alien hands. And meanwhile calm words of faith and prayer were rising, stilling into reverential silence the children's sobs, and consecrating the sad death-room into a Presence-chamber of the Lord.

"May the Judge, before Whom thou must appear, accept thee, purge thee from all earthly stain, and draw thee into His bosom of endless rest, forgiven, blest for evermore! Amen.

"May the place of waiting be to thee refreshment, light, perfect cleansing, endless growth of Divine beauty, the Face of God transforming thee more and more into Himself! Amen.

"May Christ, Who has called thee, receive thee, and the Angels carry thee into the bosom of thy Lord, with Whom mayst thou live for evermore! Amen."

There was a pause when the prayers were ended, and then, at a whisper from Daubeney,

one by one the children rose, and, casting a last look of love upon their brother, left the room. For the last time they had seen him resting naturally on his soft pillows, when next they came to visit him he would lie stiff and rigid on the hard bare mattresses, waiting burial.

Daubeny lingered behind that he might be at hand to comfort Sir Kenelm when he likewise should go. But minute after minute passed, and still the bereaved father stood motionless, unconscious of all but the still boy-face, with its closed eyes and damp, dark, curling hair. Daubeny saw that the dread attendants of the chamber of death were hovering round, anxious to begin their needful offices, and Parsons whispered that time should not be lost, that the young limbs were already stiffening in the unelastic bands of death.

"Come away, now," he said, laying his hand on his friend's arm. "Do not grieve to leave this room. What we see here is not Ralph, but the worn-out garment that he laid aside before arraying himself in the strength and beauty of the heavenly garb. Come away into some other place, where we may picture him as he is now."

Sir Kenelm listened without interruption, but when Daubeny attempted gently to draw him away, he cast his hand off with fierce resistance, and resumed his old attitude of contemplation.


Daubeny refrained for some minutes from

Further effort, but at last feeling that it was imperatively needful to get him from the room, he forcibly unclosed the fingers in whose clasp the dead hand was fast growing cold. It seemed a hard thing thus to part father and child, and Sir Kenelm turned on him with set teeth and flashing eyes.

"Yes, be cruel like your God," he said in a voice that could scarcely be recognised. "He has taken my boy's soul—steal away his body now, and I shall have *nothing* left! Oh! I am quite forsaken!"

His strength seemed to fail at the last words, and his voice grew weary. Daubeny, feeling his fingers relax, unclasped them firmly, and Sir Kenelm, tottering, submitted to his persistence, and leaning on his arm, passed slowly from the room. Parsons hurrying on in front, cleared a passage through the servants, who, at their late master's approach, shrunk back as from a spectre. Sir Kenelm passed without seeming to observe them, and when he reached his own room, left the support of Daubeny's arm, went in, and locked the door behind him.

"'Tis sad," observed Parsons, with an air of sanctimonious melancholy, "that Sir Kenelm should set himself so against the will of Providence. He has been a sad sinner, poor gentleman, though always, I must say, a good master to me. I trust your exhortations may be blessed to him, sir, and that he may be led to sincere repentance."



"God grant that you and I may never know such sorrows or temptations as his have been, Parsons!" said Daubeny, severely. "May be, we should come out of them less creditably. Sir Kenelm has acted nobly of late," and he turned quickly away from the self-righteous valet.

There is in the days which elapse between death and burial, a strange unlikeness to other days, a depth of concentrated tenderness among the mourners for the dead and for each other, a living in the present, bounded by no future but the narrow horizon of the funeral-day, which makes them less intolerable than the days that come after, when the round of common life begins again, when we smile and talk as usual, and the heart must bleed and ache in secret. The soul, freshly released from the torture of suspense, and sometimes too weary to realise its bereavement, is at first able to repose in an interval of unreflecting peace. At the close of the very day even on which their brother died—a strange, dark Christmas Day for them—a rebound came to the overstrained spirits of Sir Kenelm's children; a reaction from the hopeless anguish of the morning. The closed shutters looked no longer so unnatural when the twilight had fallen, and they gathered almost cheerfully round the nursery fire, talking together, and listening to Granny Weedon's stories of past times, while, without, the noiseless snow was falling. But their

sorrow came back in its poignancy when at bedtime they had to pass the locked door of the darkened room, where yesterday their presence had been so welcomed, and to which their feet turned by such a natural impulse. Then, as with averted heads, they hurried by, each inwardly picturing with shrinking fear the shrouded outline of its lonely occupant, the children began to understand the aching significance of that hard word "death." They tried to be glad that he was at rest, and needed their poor care no longer, but it was difficult to believe that in the shapeless Immensity to which he had gone forth, he had no craving for the familiar faces and habits that belonged to the warm world of the living.

"I wish you would insist on my father letting you into his room, Mr. Daubeny," said Lettice, when he came to her in the nursery. "He has been shut up there all day, and has tasted no food since last evening, and oh, what an age ago that seems!"

"To tell the truth I have feared to intrude, knowing he always chooses to be alone when he is in trouble. Would you not be more likely to be of use to him than I? I feel nervously afraid of clumsy blundering that may do more harm than good, and long that I had the finer instincts of a woman to guide me."

"I am afraid also," said Lettice trembling. "Why do the bells peal so to-night, when they ought to be tolling?"

"It is Christmas Day, remember."

"Ah yes, I had forgotten," and Lettice passed her hand wearily across her forehead. "We have done nothing to keep it, Mr. Daubeny—I wish we could have had a little service in the chapel."

"We made our Christmas Communion with Ralph this morning, you know, and I fear the chapel is locked up, and the keys in the possession of some one else. But I will come presently and have prayers with you in the nursery. Meanwhile I will go to your father, and in a few minutes' time you might bring the little ones to say good-night to him. I posted your letter," he added, pausing on the threshold. "It seemed so strange to be sending one off now in Ralph's writing. And with it, I sent a few lines of my own to Archdeacon Egerton. He has always taken a peculiar interest in your brother."

Daubeny rapped three or four times at Sir Kenelm's door before any notice was taken. At last a step approached the other side, and Sir Kenelm, unlocking it, stood before him. The room was quite dark, and the candle Daubeny brought with him had scarcely power to disperse the gloom. He closed the door behind him silently, and the two stood together by the fireless grate.

"How long is this rebellion to continue?" asked Daubeny, in a low, grave voice. "When will you cease to struggle against the chastisements of your Father in Heaven,

and learn the happiness of submission, Sir Kenelm?"

He had been alarmed at the bitter God-reproaching manner in which Sir Kenelm had taken his new stroke, and was hardly prepared for the gentle tone in which he answered :

"Have patience with me, Daubeny. Angry resentment at the decree of Heaven which takes my son from me, I can, and have already, in a measure, overcome. But there is no making terms with remorse. I made his last months bitter—had I been kinder he might be living yet. God only knows what capacities, what noble gifts of heart and brain, what aspirations, what gladness for others, will be buried in his grave! O, when one thinks what *might have been!*"

"God knows best!" said Daubeny. "When He has spoken, and called forth one of His creatures from this world, it is wrong for us to torment ourselves by dwelling on secondary causes. For Ralph personally, I think, no lot could well be happier. He has lived through his best years, merely put his lips to what is bitter in life's cup, and now is taken from the evil we know is coming, to begin life afresh in the congenial air of Paradise, where all sweet things put forth an easy and unimpeded growth."

"His *was* a happy childhood!" exclaimed Sir Kenelm. "But in this last twelvemonth he has in truth to its last farthing 'paid glad

Life's arrears of pain, darkness, and cold! How harshly I treated his boyish weaknesses! how bitterly I made him rue his one act of defiance—poor, foolish child! how often I made his heart sicken with nervous fear! I *must* talk of him often—often, Daubeny—I dare not nurse this grief in secret as I did my last. Better weary those who live with me by egotistical laments, than wound them by the spiteful cruelty which is bred by the irritation of a hidden sore.”

Daubeny's eyes grew tearful.

“It seems something of an impertinence to intrude on such sorrow as yours,” he said, “and I fear I often only gail, when most I long to soothe. Forgive me if I spoke to you unjustly just now. I care for you so much that my over-anxiety often makes me blundering and over-bearing.”

“It will not do for the pastor of five thousand souls to take the offences of each individual in his flock to heart as you do mine,” said Sir Kenelm, with a sad smile. “Now listen, Daubeny. I have been thinking over plans a little. To-day is Sunday. The funeral must be on Thursday, and on Friday we will leave the house. Will you arrange with the undertaker?”—as he said this his voice resumed its old tone of forced, icy composure—“and see that everything is done as economically as possible. The children must have their mourning from the same place, and it must be of the cheapest

and simplest kind. I hope Miss Oliver will understand that—and will you tell her how grieved I am at being able to do nothing for her, but I am literally almost penniless. I cannot even afford to buy a little decent black for our one remaining servant—an omission which will, I fear, be a real shock to the poor old lady's sense of propriety."

"Leave all to me! As to fees, you need give nothing to Parsons—I am bound, after our long acquaintance, to give him a handsome *douceur* at parting, and I will hand it over to him in your name as well as mine."

"A thousand thanks, my dear fellow! And will you crown your kindness by writing a line to inform Mr. Bradshaw that we hope on Friday to rid the place of our presence?"

Daubeny promised, and at the same moment there was a tap at the door, and Lettice with Edward and Cicely entered. She glanced doubtfully at Daubeny, and then, encouraged by his smile, drew near.

"Is it you, my little motherly girl?" said Sir Kenelm, lifting her small chin and gazing into her wistful face. "You look cold and pale. It has been a weary day for you."

Surprised and relieved by the natural softness of his tone, Lettice burst into sudden tears. She was in that state of nervous tension when a kind word is sufficient to flood the eyes.

Sir Kenelm drew her gently to him, *and* folded her in a close embrace.

"Think of your brother, Lettice," *he* whispered, "with your mother to-night. Should you not envy him?"

"We can never feel desolate while we have you, father," answered Lettice, nestling her head upon his shoulder.

"Though we must leave this beloved place," continued Sir Kenelm, "I do not doubt that we shall find another happy home. And now take these sleepy creatures off to bed, and follow them yourself as soon as you can, my sweet little girl. You won't be disturbed by any anxiety to-night."

"Where are you going?" asked Daubeny, as immediately after the light supper at which he had persuaded his friend to join him, he perceived Sir Kenelm take up his candle and turn away towards the death-room.

"To my boy," he answered. "There are few nights left in which I can see his face. He will not disturb me—I shall sleep quietly enough near him."

From that hour till the burial day, Sir Kenelm seldom quitted his dead son's side. Sometimes, towards evening, he would steal out of the awful room and wander out upon the heath, for within the house little quiet was to be had. The judicial investigation which had followed his confession had opened every door and driven out all privacy, and by the kind permission of the

heiress's guardian, scores of prying eyes had since daily investigated each nook and corner of this notorious Castle of mysteries. Mr. Bradshaw had adjudged that the windows of the tower in which the corpse lay should alone have their blinds drawn down—"no need to render the whole building more gloomy than it is by nature," he observed; and in the more distant portions of the Castle, unchecked by the presence of death, the carpenters still continued at their work.

CHAPTER XX.

Oh, very gloomy is the House of Woe,
Where tears are falling, while the bell is knelling,
With all the dark solemnities, which show
That Death is in the dwelling.
Oh, very, very dreary is the room
Where Love, domestic Love, no longer nestles,
But smitten by the common stroke of Doom
The corpse lies on the trestles.

Hoon.

It was growing dark on the evening of the day following Ralph's death, when Daubeny, weary with the long day's distasteful labour—preparations for the double solemnities of the funeral, and the move to London—entered Sir Kenelm's empty study, and stretched himself on the sofa to enjoy a few minutes' sleep. He had scarcely closed his eyes when a tap at the door aroused him, and Parsons, entering, handed him a card, informing him at the same time that Mr. Bradshaw would be glad to have a few minutes' private conversation with him.

Daubeny's face grew stern, for, in spite of his Christian charity, the vulgar airs of domineering patronage assumed by Bradshaw towards the deposed family had by no means tended to incline his heart to his clerical brother. However, he gave directions that he should be admitted, and a minute later found himself face to face with the new master of Rotherhame Castle.

"Your communication reached me early this morning, sir," remarked Mr. Bradshaw, extending his hand with obvious hesitation. "I am come in person to make my reply."

"Will you sit down?" said Daubeney with quiet courtesy, placing a chair. "You find me in a rather disorderly condition, I fear. I am in the thick of preparations for our journey on Friday."

"Pray make no apologies," and Mr. Bradshaw graciously waved his hand. "Let me commence by observing that I have heard with sincere emotion of the departure from this vale of tears of my former young friend, Ralph Harold. It is always a painful thing to behold a fellow-creature cut off in the morning of life, but I earnestly trust that the poor lad's untimely end may be a warning to many, arousing those of his family who are yet careless, and reminding the gay and frivolous that none is too young to be called away."

Slightly impatient of this string of platitudes, Daubeney changed the subject.

"You are very kind," he said, "and I will communicate your condolences to Sir Kenelm Harold. At present, to speak of business! I hope the arrangements I mentioned in my letter will prove convenient to you."

"Thank you . . . yes," said Mr. Bradshaw, doubtfully, for he was a little nettled by the decided manner in which Daubeney had

cut short his benevolent moralising. "I presume, sir, from the tone of your letter, that you are in Sir Kenelm Harold's confidence, and that I may safely treat with you as with his representative."

"Undoubtedly. I was his librarian, and have the happiness of being his intimate friend."

"Oh, *indeed*," and Mr. Bradshaw accented the word with profound meaning. "Well, Mr. Daubeny, one of my chief objects in seeing you this evening is to express my hope that the afflicted family will on no account, as you tentatively suggested, leave the Castle on the *day* of the interment. It is true"—between smacking his lips and rolling his r's, Mr. Bradshaw's sentences took a long time forming, the composer obviously feeling that he might take his own time, and need no longer, as of yore, hurry himself, or humbly feel his way—"it is true that we wish Lady Rotherhame to settle in by the end of the week, that she may keep the New Year among her people; but so small a portion of the mansion is occupied by your party, that preparations for her reception can very well be carried on, and she can make her *entrée* either on Friday or Saturday next, as the case may be."


"Thank you. Friday would certainly suit us best, as some friends from a distance wish to attend the funeral, and therefore we

should prefer its taking place on Thursday afternoon."

"With regard to the mournful ceremony itself, the idea has been mooted among a certain section that it would be an act of kindly sympathy for the tenants on the estate to attend. But, Mr. Daubeny, you will appreciate my motive when I tell you that I have taken upon myself to place a veto on that. Under the peculiar circumstances of the case, and considering Sir Kenelm Harold's very painful position, I think you will agree with me that anything like a public or official tribute of respect should be avoided. On the other hand, I am, of course, pleased to learn from you that personal friends of the deceased will be here to follow the poor remains to their last resting place. I myself, in consideration of my early acquaintance with the poor young fellow, have thoughts of making one of the number."

"Sir Kenelm has, I think, given instructions that the proceedings shall be of a strictly private nature," said Mr. Daubeny, stiffly. "He invites none to be present but members of the Harold family; and therefore I am sure, Mr. Bradshaw, that you need not think yourself under any necessity to attend."

"Perhaps it would be as well not!" returned Mr. Bradshaw, with a perceptible rise




of dignity, for Daubeney's words did not fall pleasantly on ears habituated of late to accents of deferential submission only. "One other subject I must touch on before I leave you, sir—an unpleasant subject, but I am bound to keep before me the interests of the youthful Countess, whose guardian and near relative I am." He coughed, hemmed and hawed, and at last, clearing his throat, spoke firmly. "In packing up their little private belongings, I trust that Sir Kenelm Harold's family will bear clearly in mind that they are enjoying here the hospitality of another, and that this house and its contents are the sole and entire property of my niece, Lady Rotherhame. I wish to bring the fact before their minds as courteously and delicately as possible, and am, therefore, glad to be able to do so through your medium. I am aware that, without any evil intention, young persons are apt to be slow to realise any great change in fortune; and it is very possible that, from a natural attachment to things they have looked on as their own, the Misses Harold might be led to pack up and take hence, even costly articles, to whose possession they can legally lay no claim."

"Do you suspect my friends of pilfering?" asked Daubeney, while his cheek flushed an angry red. "In that case, your best course would be to summon the police, and let them make an investigation. Our boxes are all at your disposal."

"If I did feel indisposed to rely blindly on the honesty of Sir Kenelm Harold, I think I should scarcely be without justification, Mr. Daubeny," returned Mr. Bradshaw, with crushing, though tempered, severity.

Daubeny was staggered by the retort, and Mr. Bradshaw, perceiving his advantage, added with an almost angelic air of pitying wisdom—


"It is certainly shortsighted policy on the part of Sir Kenelm's admirers to adopt the exasperated and aggressive tone they do towards the family of the present Countess. Ridiculously enough, we may with truth complain that they treat us as if *we* were intruders, usurpers, who wish to cheat the lawful owner of his rights. I do not know whether, in so doing, they carry out Sir Kenelm's instructions; but at all events, whatever the private grudges he and his friends may choose to entertain, I cannot allow myself to be openly affronted by those to whom I extend the hospitality of this house. An old woman in Sir Kenelm's pay, the very woman, I fear, who will have to appear as a party in this sad case, attacked me when I was here a few hours since with the most improper violence, positively denying me admittance into a room I desired to enter; and appearing entirely to forget that neither she nor her employer had any authority whatever under this roof. It is really necessary to make it clearly understood that here



I am, and must be, master! Anyhow, you may inform the person to whom I allude, Mr. Daubeney, if you interest yourself at all in her welfare, that unless she conducts herself with strict propriety in the future, I shall be forced immediately to eject her from the estate."

"You might pardon her for believing that, even under the roof of another, people have some right of guardianship over their own dead," replied Daubeney, who knew that Nurse Weedon had successfully frustrated Mr. Bradshaw's prying wish to inspect the remains of Ralph Harold. "The lifeless body of a young boy is after all but a sorry sight, Mr. Bradshaw. However, Mrs. Weedon will not trouble you long; she goes with us on Friday."

"My wish has ever been, for her worthy son's sake, to spare her in every possible way," said Mr. Bradshaw; "and had it been left to Mr. Middleton and myself, we should not have pressed the prosecution against her. But in a case of such serious suspicion as the present, private feelings must be laid aside; and all we could do to allay poor Edward Weedon's natural anxiety was to urge him to use his influence to persuade the miserable woman to turn Queen's evidence. Had I then had the experience of her uncontrolled and insolent temper that I now have, Mr. Daubeney, I might have felt less personal interest in her fate. And now I need detain you no further. I think I have omitted



nothing that I wished to say. A moment though! yes, I have forgotten one point. I am told that a crucifix has been placed upon the corpse! Quite apart from any doctrinal objection to such a superstitious observance, which you know, sir, can by no possibility change or benefit the spiritual condition of the departed who are thus ornamented, the crucifix, I hear, contains gems of value. I hope that the article in question will be removed before the interment takes place. If any decoration is required, the flowers in the conservatory are placed at your disposal."

Mr. Daubeny sprang from his seat.

"Come with me!" he said, with an ominous bending of the brows; and, opening the door, he crossed over to one on the opposite side, beckoning Mr. Bradshaw imperiously to follow.

Too much taken by surprise to object or hesitate, that gentleman mechanically obeyed him. They stood in a darkened room, but the moon was slowly rising behind a screen of leafless elms, and through the partially raised blind, a beam, pale and blue, stole in upon a bare, dismantled bed, on which lay a sharp and shrouded outline. Close by sat Sir Kenelm Harold, fast asleep, his dark hair showing in vivid contrast with the white sheet against which his head was resting. A large bloodhound at his feet sprang up as the intruder entered, but, happily, perceiving that Daubeny was there, crouched once

more, and satisfied himself with keeping his red, watchful eyes suspiciously on Mr. Bradshaw's movements. Daubeny drew aside the sheet, and his companion saw before him the still, awful features of his former pupil. The face was beautiful with the inexpressive marble beauty of a statue, which bears even in ideal proportions the human outline, but which knows nothing of human life, grief, or passion—impassive, soulless, and alone!

"There is what you want," said Mr. Daubeny, pointing to the cold breast on which lay the rude old silver crucifix—Ralph's best loved treasure. "Take it, Mr. Bradshaw; if I were rich enough I would buy it of you, for though bought with your ward's money, this boy's mother believed it to be her own, and gave it to him, with tears, on her deathbed. But it is, as you say, valuable, and would fetch a large price from a curiosity dealer—such a price as I cannot afford to compete against. Take it, take it, I say!"

Mr. Daubeny, like most gentle persons, had something terrible about him when strongly moved, and, perhaps, his chivalrous devotion to his unhappy friends made him a little unreasonable in his anger against those whom he regarded as their enemies. Mr. Bradshaw changed colour as he looked on the senseless, unrecognising, yet lovely face before him, on which, though now icily composed, suffering had left its indelible

brand. However, driven to bay by Daubeny's defiant tone, he bent, and stretched out his hand. But the stone-cold touch of the dead was about to rattle sent a chill to his very bones, and he drew back suddenly.

"I have no wish to press my niece's claims to an extreme," he said; "if that relic is peculiarly endeared to the family by domestic associations, let them keep it. I wish you a good evening, Mr. Daubeny," and Mr. Bradshaw turned tail and left the room with creaking, hasty steps.

Daubeny shut the door after him, kissed the large eyelids, which closed like drooping petals over the unseeing eyes, and kneeling down by the side of the sleeper, shed bitter tears. There is cruel need of patience to bear the griefs of those we love.

Presently Sir Kenelm wakened with a start, and looking anxiously towards the bed perceived that his son's face was uncovered.

"Is the coffin come?" he asked, confusedly, as though still under the influence of sleep.

"No, dear Sir Kenelm; it is not to be brought till to-morrow evening."

"I dreamt they came in with it, and took him away while I was sleeping," said Sir Kenelm, "and when I awoke I was half-afraid I should find him gone. Remember, Daubeny, no hands but mine must lay him there to his last sleep. As a child he used often to beg me to put him to bed, poor little

fellow! But did no one come in just now? In my sleep I heard voices, and I feel sure someone has been in the room."

"You heard me opening the door," said Daubeney, evasively. "Oscar seems to like to share your vigils," he added, to change the subject, as he patted the broad head of the grand, dangerous, loving dog.

"Yes, he has stayed with me from the beginning, and has used these long endless hours in thought as I have. I am going to leave him in charge of *his* grave, that when we are all gone it may never be deserted. You accept the charge, do you not, my Oscar?"

The dog looked up with eyes that seemed to long for speech, and licked his master's hand.

Daubeney sat down on the edge of the bed and gazed with mournful tenderness on his friend's face, hardly less altered, hardly less still than the dead face on the pillow, and wearing the same strange blending of likeness and unlikeness to its former self. The fierceness of a secret defiance lurked no longer repellantly in the depths of the great, sad eyes—they were softened to a dreamy gentleness, and the lip and nostril had lost something of their scornful, impatient curve. As long as he had been living in hostility to his God, and in the formal breach of His laws, Sir Kenelm had looked upon Him with all the acrimonious aversion of personal

enmity; he had taken a kind of vindictive pleasure in treading under His chastisements, in braving His judgments. But now, reconciled at last, he no longer felt himself at war with the Race, with Fate, with the Universe. Peace was entering in, the peace of profound resignation to a profound sorrow, and its intensity of mournful calm was revealed by each feature of his face, each accent of his voice. It seemed to him as though his heart, with all its strong bulwarks of pride and obstinacy, had been shattered into ruins, and that, through its thousand gaps and crevices, a stern pure air from Purgatory was blowing freshly, cooling its fever and reviving its wasted energy. At last the unequal battle had ceased, the flag of truce had been hoisted, and the All Merciful—generous to a fallen foe—was laying His hand upon him, and bidding him once more arise and hope.

"How tall he is!" said Sir Kenelm, suddenly, "in a year's time he would have been six foot high. I used to mark against the wall each year the inches he had gained; but now," he went on, bending over the dead with an intent and yearning passion in his eyes, and pushing back the dark hair from the ice-cold brow, "I shall never see you grow any more, my boy. Your eyes are shut, your heart is cold, your feet are powerless. I shall never see you, as has been my longing since the day I first kissed

you in your cradle, in the glory of manly strength, winning all hearts by your beauty and your charm. Your training was almost over; on the very threshold of the world which I looked to you to captivate and conquer, cruel death has stopped you, and ruined all. All that you have learned is wasted; your gifts have perished, a bitter frost has killed them. Oh, my child, my child, have you perished utterly? or are you but asleep, awaiting the coming of the spring? Have you, indeed, laboured in vain, and spent your strength for naught?—walking in a vain shadow a little while, and vanishing as a shadow into nothingness?”

“There is no shadow without its substance,” said Daubeny. “The events of this mortal life are the shadows cast out upon the earth by the great realities of heaven. They pass and change with the revolutions of the sun, but their substance abides. ‘The things which are not seen are eternal.’”

CHAPTER XXI.

We leave the well beloved place,
Where first we gazed upon the sky ;
The roofs that heard our earliest cry
Will shelter those of stranger-race.

TENNYSON.

For the lily-bed lies beaten down by the rain,
And the tallest is gone from the place where he grew,
My tallest ! my fairest ! O let me complain !
For all life is unroofed, and the tempests beat through.

FABER.

LATE on the following afternoon Sir Kenelm wandered out for an hour's refreshment in the garden, and avoiding his children, who, hand in hand, were paying farewell visits to their old haunts, passed through a wicket-gate into a lonely copse of bare oak trees and mournful Scotch firs. The wind was rising and moaned cheerlessly, as though murmuring a dirge over the skeleton branches, and the unknown graves of primroses and bluebells. His feet sank noiselessly in the pathway of yielding moss, and in the silent solitude of the woods the voices of Nature were speaking in wordless language sorrows and hopes unutterable by man.

Vegetation grew rank in this sequestered spot ; nettles shouldered one another in sullen groups, like ferocious tramps skulking by the wayside ; the scent of wild parsley hung upon the air, and Sir Kenelm could scarcely force

his way through the overgrown ferns and bushes that met across his path. He had, as he himself had said, thought long and deeply by his dead boy's side,—exhaustive thought for which the mind has only time or strength once or twice in a lifetime—looked back into the past, forward into the future, deep into his own heart, high into the Heart of God; and his brow wore a quiet, weary look, like the earth wears when a great storm has passed over her face.

He had braced himself to bear the fast-accumulating load of humiliation and agony that was being laid upon him. Yet even now, courageous and resolved as he had taught himself to be, he rejoiced to find an interval of rest and freedom, so instinctively does the human soul, by its indestructible shrinking from pain, show that it was created for a destiny of joy. It was a kind of resurrection to come forth from the presence of the mute uncomprehending corpse, and move about among swaying branches and bending plants, Nature's living, green, and sinless offspring. Yet even there, pain mingled with gladness—strange incongruous pair, strangely united by the voice of God in the marriage-tie of mortal life, to be parted by death alone!

Filial love for the place where he had been born had ever been a passion with Sir Kenelm, and now the scent and touch of the beloved soil thrilled him with a wild regret, and he drank in his native air as if to lay in a stock

on which he might draw through the coming years of drought.

There was a significance about each common point, each outbuilding, gate, or bend of a hedge, known to himself alone. In that deep lane he had met a drunkard one wild November evening in his childhood, and had cowered tremblingly with Granny behind the hollies, while the noisy wretch had staggered past. By that hedge he had swallowed poison-berries, and gone through the horrors of anticipating speedy death and judgment. The odour of sanctity hung about the green courtyard, where he had worn weary hours away in the patient endeavour to win the hearts of geese and chickens, scorning to lure them by the sordid temptation of barley-corns, and vainly hoping that they might grow to love him for his own sake.

Dear to his soul was each stone of the aged terraced walls, each broken-down rampart where moss and ivy struggled to heal the wounds made by Cromwell's cannon. Dear the fish-ponds where the water-lilies grew; the orchard where he had climbed the trees for apples and showered them down on the rough head of Charles Weedon, his single playmate; the swing in the great trees at the postern gate, where, rushing through the air with a maddening sense of freedom, he had driven the pheasants whirring through the boughs, or startled the owls from their midday sleep. Dear the oak gallery where he, the solitary

child, wandering late and early, had found a friend in every portrait, and dearer still those grand hills which, in their imperial heather-mantle, their crown of black firs and scarlet mountain-ash, rose royally behind the Castle, shutting out the sky, and filling his young life with the romance of mystery.

Ah! how fair, how solemn was it all! how beautiful would it look in the days to come when his eyes would no more behold it! For others, the white mist, ascending from the water-meadows, would people the hill-slopes with fantastic phantom shapes. For others, the moon would rise behind the church tower, and the sun send his first crimson across the shadowed mounds beneath. For others, the wood-periwinkles would shine like setting stars in a vernal night, and the May-trees blossom into white and pink.

The sacred old home, hallowed by the marvellous consecration of a child's waking imagination, and by the memories of an ideal love; the birthplace of his children, the grave of his forefathers, was passing into strangers' hands. The violation of our dead loves, the mutilation of the living, are bitter things to bear—both seemed to meet in this alien invasion of his holy ground.

Dropping down on a little mound, thrown up by the roots of a cedar, Sir Kenelm's eyes travelled slowly from one familiar spot to another till they rested on the churchyard,—calm and unchanged, save that near the

chancel at the lime-tree's foot a heap of rich brown mould lay piled up by an open grave. With a dread curiosity he strained his eyes to see it, noticed the rooks wheeling in the air above, fancied he could catch the thud of the spade as, wielded by some unseen hand, it struck among the clods of earth.

Suddenly a step behind him diverted his attention, and turning, he perceived a wood-cutter, axe in hand, standing under the tree by which he sat. It was Joseph Jenkins, a labouring man, who, six months since, had been committed to the house of correction for pilfering on Lord Rotherhame's estate.

"What are you going to do?" Sir Kenelm inquired, in a tone of suspicious irritation, and springing to his feet, he looked at the spreading branches of his old favourite.

Jenkins eyed his former master with a rather insolent stare, and replied, without touching his hat—

"Tree's coming down, sir, that's what I be going to do."

"The cedar coming down!" exclaimed Sir Kenelm, with rising colour. "Why, it's four hundred years old! Have you authority for what you are doing?"

"I've had orders from head quarters," answered the man, doggedly, and with a look which plainly signified it was no business of Sir Kenelm's. "There's been a many marked, and this here's one of 'em."

At this juncture the arrival of two gentlemen, whom Sir Kenelm soon discovered through the falling light to be Mr. Bradshaw and Robert Bogle, gave a turn to the conversation. The pair were followed by the gamekeeper and bailiff, and Sir Kenelm's first impulse was to get at once out of sight of the inflated Oxonian and the consciously virtuous Mr. Bradshaw, who still humbly attired, as on the day when he had ordered him off his grounds, in a stuff coat, cotton gloves, and large white tie, and having entirely recovered from the shock his feelings had sustained at Mr. Daubeney's hands, now regarded his vanquished foe with an air of self-complacent exultation.

Perceiving, however, that he had been recognised, Sir Kenelm changed his mind, and awaited the new comers with outward composure.

"The cheek of the fellow, sticking about as if he was lord and master!" muttered Robert, in a tone which did not escape his godfather's quick ears.

"Hush, Bobbie," said Mr. Bradshaw, and added in a tone of ineffable and distant condescension: "Good evening to you, Jenkins, hard at work, I am glad to see. Good evening, Sir Kenelm," and here he nodded doubtfully, as though swayed by conscientious scruples as to the propriety of addressing a suspected felon in terms of ordinary civility.

Sir Kenelm removed his hat without reply, and for an instant a reviving sensation of the awe with which their late pupil's father had inspired them, kept Mr. Bradshaw and Robert likewise silent. But at last, peeping at him through a corner of his eye, Mr. Bradshaw observed in his face a sorrow-worn gentleness which emboldened him. He was one of those persons to whom words are a necessity, and who are able on the greatest emergencies to reduce all human emotions to the limits of a neat, well-balanced phrase.

"We must condole with you," he said, mildly, "on the sad event that has taken place in your family," and he turned an expressive glance towards the flag on the Keep, which half mast high, hung drooping in the wintry air.

"I must condole too, Sir Kenelm," blurted out Robert, feeling under the necessity of saying something sympathising, but without a shade of real pity on his heavy features.

"I thank you both," said Sir Kenelm, with stately courtesy, "and allow me at the same time to thank Lady Rotherhame, through you, sir, for the consideration we have received at her hands. The death of my son will save me from the necessity of trespassing longer on her patience."

"Do not thank me for what was but an act of Christian duty," said Mr. Bradshaw sweetly; "but as some small return for what you are pleased to term my consideration,

favour me with a few moments' private conversation."

Sir Kenelm inclined his head, and they were about to move on, when Jenkins interrupted with a touch of the hat and spiteful grin.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Robert, but Sir Kenelm don't approve of my cutting down this 'ere tree, and I wants to know whose orders I be to take."

"What is it?" inquired Mr. Bradshaw, stopping, and turning round. "Ah! that tree, Sir Kenelm! I *fear* it is sentenced, for just behind it a little pleasure house is to be created for the ladies, and the cedar would sadly impede the beautiful view. However, the matter might be reconsidered, if you could mention any particular interest connected with it that would plcad for a reprieve."

"I know of none that would affect you, sir," said Sir Kenelm, with rising colour, "though possibly Lady Rotherhame might be interested in the fate of a tree planted by her ancestor four centuries ago."

Mr. Bradshaw reddened also, and interchanged an expressive glance with Robert, while mentally searching for some retort which might chastise Sir Kenelm's rudeness.

"Well, let it stand for the present, till we have had time to consult the ladies," he said, "but I fancy they will be not unlikely to sacrifice archæological claims to present convenience. Robert, will you kindly draw

back a pace? I willingly interrupt my stroll with my dear future son-in-law, Sir Kenelm, to have a little chat with you. I should much like to hear some particulars concerning poor Ralph's last hours. Were there any comforting ejaculations? any utterances of exhortation or profit for the bystanders?"

"I should be happy to oblige you in any way, but I assure you that my son on his death bed made no remarks of any general interest."

"But," pursued, Mr. Bradshaw, staring up at the sky, "was there any solid ground for hope in his end? Can you appeal to his last words—or to any expression on his death bed—as warranting the confidence that he is among the number of the elect?"

"I know that he loved God, and I believe that God loved him," returned Sir Kenelm, quietly—"a more solid basis of hope, as it appears to me, than chance expressions of feeling, however edifying."

"Ah! my poor friend," exclaimed Mr. Bradshaw, fervently, "your sneer must not keep me back from the plain speaking which I, in purest Christian charity, employ for your best and highest interests. Now that your eldest son is lying dead in the house, and that disgrace and a heavy judicial punishment are hanging over your head, I would willingly refrain from recalling old unpleasantnesses, were it possible in

any other way to open your eyes to your true character and position. Look back upon your past! I can well understand now the reason of that most painful exhibition of passion and temper which took place when I visited you last winter. You were soured by the consciousness that you were pretending to be what you were not, and attempting to impose upon me with a rank and grandeur which you well knew were not your own. And all the time you were drugging the worm within by alms-giving and works which brought you the praise of men, making a loud profession, and cloaking under a specious deceit the gross sin in which you were living."

An annihilating glance shot from Sir Kenelm's eye, but, influenced by mingled emotions of pride and humility, he repressed all retort, and walked on in silence.

"Far be it from me to deal harshly with you," continued Mr. Bradshaw, after pausing for reply, "indeed, when, after your confession, many of my friends wished me at once to take my proper place with my dear niece at the Castle, I replied without hesitation, 'No, I will not have the family disturbed, nor the poor suffering body carried out of the house until the vital spark has actually fled.'"

"You did well," said Sir Kenelm, "for to my son your ward owes the restoration of her rights. But for him, Mr. Bradshaw,

you could never have made this house your home. For myself, I admit the justice of your reproaches, and am prepared to suffer for the evil I have done. It has been worse even than you imagine, and to wish that the world would recognise this, and put me beyond the pale of its Christian charity, and spare me its pity and advice, would be to desire too kind a fate. Thank you all the same for your good intentions."

"I will say no more as you seem annoyed at my frankness," answered Mr. Bradshaw; "but how wonderfully your case illustrates those solemn words of Scripture, 'the way of transgressors is hard.' May you be led, my poor friend, into the better way of contrition and reformation, and at last become an angel in heaven. I can wish you no better wish. You have still something to say to me?" he added, interrogatively, seeing that Sir Kenelm lingered.

"There is one kindness I would ask," he answered, with painful hesitation. "If I am not mistaken you have an old photograph,—the only one of its kind, and which, probably, is of no value to you, of—of Lord—of my son, I mean," and, having corrected his embarrassing mistake, he was about to proceed, when a chuckle, which almost unawares escaped from Robert, reached his ears. He turned on him a look of such concentrated pain and anger, that it pierced even the tough crust of Mr. Bogle's obtuse-

ness, seemed about to speak, and then, recollecting himself, turned on his heel and walked rapidly away, leaving his half-spoken request unfinished. But the thought arose that this, the hour when he was going home to lay his eldest-born within his coffin, was no time to nourish bitter and resentful feelings, and, turning from the memories and noise of the hard outer world, he walked on swift and silent, while the darkness of night gathered about his steps, and around the old home which he was now to leave for ever.

The snow fell softly over tree and lawn, when next day Ralph was carried out to lie beside his mother in the cold churchyard. He had prayed that he might never more re-enter that vault whose grisly memories had haunted his wakeful nights of illness, and so they dug his grave beneath the sod, where flowers grow and grasses wave unbidden, drinking in the sunbeams and all the dews of heaven. It was a pure white bed in which he was laid to sleep, and, ere the group of mourners turned away to the sound of the tolling bell, the coffin lid was hid from view beneath the radiant cover-lid the heavens had lent. A wintry mist was beginning to rise from the clear streams which, as though benumbed with frost, moved slowly through the water-meadows, and the last pale gold of the setting sun, lighting on leafless limes and rimy hips and haws, seemed like a messenger from some

warm Land immensely far away, whom the vast journey had turned faint and cold. Cold too was the heart of the chief mourner, who, with folded arms and bent head, stood looking down into the deep cell where his love lay hidden, and the tears, which would have given him relief, were frozen at their source. Slowly the kindred of the dead came to look their last, but, though he lingered longer than them all, none turned away so resolutely, or crossed the white churchyard with so firm a step as he.

Sympathy, long denied the stricken family, came that day from unexpected sources, and as the bright-haired children, after awaiting their father by the lych gate, clung about him and began their homeward walk, they were greeted by reverent salutations from pitying villagers, and many a humble neighbour from far and near shed kindly tears. The last sacred offices had been performed by Mr. Daubeny, and close behind the members of the family had stood Josceline Murray-Carr, once more reconciled to Sir Kenelm, and almost broken down by Ralph's loss and the sore trouble of the friends he loved. Kind letters had come that morning from former acquaintances, full of grief for the dead, and goodwill for the living, and among them one from Archdeacon Egerton. Mr. Daubeny's letter had given him particulars about the family, which had gone straight to his warm heart,

and his answer, filled with mournful pity, out of which all bitterness had died, conveyed likewise a message from his daughter that she prayed unceasingly for them all. Thus does the yearning love of God force for itself channels even through the rocky mountains of hardest suffering.

The last evening in the old home was spent by Sir Kenelm and his children almost in silence, gathered close together round the blazing fire in the hall of the Ruby Tower. The flames made fitful lights and shadows on the black oak chimney-board, with its carved goblin faces, and the eight-day clock chimed out the hours cheerfully, as though unconscious that they sounded the dirge of the dying past. Unspeakable were the memories that thronged upon all hearts of happy fire-lit hours in the good days gone by; unspeakable their foreboding of an icy future. When all his children had gone to bed, and Sir Kenelm had said "Good-night," and kissed each pale, tender cheek in turn, he wandered out once more and stood with uncovered head beneath the moon, beside the new-made grave.

Early next morning—very early—before the village was astir, and long before the hour at which rumour had pronounced they were to start—travelling carriages drew up at the Castle door, and such servants as remained of the old household, assembled in the Great Hall to take leave of their former

master and his family. The young girls, in their deep mourning, went round, shaking hands with each in turn, and behind them followed Miss Oliver, who, now that the hour of parting had actually arrived, was sobbing inconsolably. A kind of hysterical thrill passed over all present, and even those servants who had felt most indifferent to, or virtuously indignant against Sir Kenelm, began to wipe their eyes. Parsons alone preserved intact the immovability required by faultless servant-breeding.

"I feel deep regret, my dear Miss Oliver," said Sir Kenelm, with a slight catch in his voice as he held the old lady's trembling hand, "at parting with one who has been such a true, unselfish friend to me and mine. May God reward you for your faithful goodness to my unhappy children. It grieves me to think," he went on, hardly knowing what he said, "that at your advanced age you should be compelled to seek a new home."

Miss Oliver could not help wondering that even at this trying moment a well-bred man like Sir Kenelm should so far forget the *bien séances* as to make this barefaced allusion to her time of life.

"Dear Lord Rotherhame," she answered, with a little nervous sound, half giggle, half sob—"for Lord Rotherhame you must ever remain to me—I earnestly hope that you will not give yourself one moment's uneasiness on my behalf. I should have told you of my

good fortune before now, but shrank from intruding my affairs upon you, when you were absorbed with more important matters. I am thankful to be able to say that in quitting your precious darlings, I am not left wholly unprovided for. To leave dear Rotherhame altogether after my long residence, would have been, I am sure, too severe a trial, and—and—in short, Dr. Bogle has offered me a home."

"Do you really intend to take charge of his daughters?" asked Sir Kenelm, astonished.

"I do indeed, but—but—I hope you won't be shocked—as a mamma! The Doctor has long felt very kindly towards me—more kindly than I at all deserved—and long ago he asked me, but I told him I felt I could not leave the dear girls till the elder ones at least were grown up and had passed under the Duchess's own eye. He behaved most nobly, was quite content to wait, and though the lady of that unsatisfactory Mr. Bradshaw has of late tried to coax him out of entering into any connection with a governess, the Doctor assures me that he will keep to his word. He is a truly excellent man, and I trust I shall be able to make his dear daughters happy. And so—and so—your darlings will always have someone left in the old place to love them," and here the sobs, after their temporary lull, broke out with accumulated violence.

Sir Kenelm congratulated the agitated lady, a gleam of sincere pleasure shining in his sad eyes. There was something in their depths like crystallized tears—tears which might have formed there long ago, and been frozen ere they could fall by the sharp frosts of pain. His self-contained calm contrasted strangely with the universal emotion of the rest. As death is died a hundred times in anticipation, and the actual dying is often easy and gentle, so he had lived through the bitterness of the home-leaving beforehand, and now that the moment had actually arrived, was almost without feeling. Turning from Miss Oliver, he passed down the Hall, exchanging rapid salutations with the bystanders, and meanwhile, a wintry blast, entering through the open door, stirred the coats of mail upon the walls, till they clattered, as though each closed visor concealed long rows of rattling teeth.

“Good-bye, Parsons,” said Sir Kenelm, as he stood, at last, before his former valet, who had of late received the congratulations of the household on his successful candidature for the post of butler under the new dynasty. “We are going to a place you probably have never heard of,” he added, with a mixture of amusement and bitterness in his tone, “unless whispers of the East of London have ever reached you in your politer region of the Metropolis.”

"If I remember right, Sir Kenelm, you were once interested in a church in those parts," answered Parsons, bowing with immovable serenity. "I hope you will meet with every happiness in your new abode, sir, and that the young ladies will keep their health."

Sir Kenelm nodded, and walked on. At the door, with averted head, and eyes that simply glared in their desperate effort to keep dry, stood Josceline Carr.

"Josceline! you here, my boy!" exclaimed Sir Kenelm, with unfeigned surprise. "I thought you went away yesterday."

"Don't be angry, Sir Kenelm. I stayed at the White Leopard last night. I couldn't let you go away and not be here to say good-bye—and curse the upstarts who turn you out. I wish I could give them their deserts, confounded, insolent snobs that they are!" and turning away he stamped with impotent rage.

"Dear, kind-hearted boy," said Sir Kenelm, "for I have long discovered, Josceline," he went on smiling, "that your blood-thirsty sentiments flow from the kindest instincts. Will you wipe out old scores, Josce, and for Ralph's sake let me see you once or twice again?"

Here Josceline interposed by a violent stamping and signalling, apparently intended to summon Daubeney to his aid, and that gentleman, who at a short distance had

listened to the brief colloquy, now came up, and said—

“If you really find any comfort in Josceline’s friendship, and I know you must yearn over anyone who knew and loved our blessed Ralph, give your consent to a little scheme on which he has set his heart. He wants to leave his present quarters, and migrate to the vacant corner in our Parsonage.”

Sir Kenelm took the young fellow’s hand, and pressed it with a tight clasp.

“Thanks, thanks, my boy,” was all he could utter, and then, as a look of dawning cheerfulness brightened Josceline’s woe-begone countenance, he hastily left him, and bestowing one last kiss on the troubled brow of Oscar, lifted his little ones into the carriage, and sprang himself in after them. The cortége, which had an almost funeral aspect, started, and as it crossed the ice-bound moat, entered the leafless forest, and passed slowly out of sight of the stately, ancient pile, the snow was already lying thick and deep on the new-made grave by the chancel-arch.

CHAPTER XXII.

I fall upon the thorns of life—I bleed!

SHELLEY.


A man whom fortune hath cruelly scratched.

SHAKESPEARE.

It was near eight o'clock on a dark Saturday night in January, and the day, which being the first of the New Year, had been ushered in by joyous peals from all the old City churches, was going out in raw cold and gloom. An icy fog had all day brooded over London, blotting the tops of towers and chimneys out of sight, magnifying to portentous dimensions the cabs and omnibuses which cautiously crawled onward through the crowded streets, and discolouring the sky to the hue of an unripe orange. The sun, burning like a red-hot penny through the lurid veil that tried to smother him, had been powerless to disperse the universal gloom. Gas had flared all day in gin-palaces, shops and offices, and everywhere boys with flaring torches darted among rash pedestrians who, with wheezing coughs and eyes stinging from the fog-fumes, ran up against each other in blind bewilderment.

A boisterous wind from the east, rising at nightfall, drove the smoke hither and thither, and thinned the film upon the river, and

then, allured from their filthy cellars by the attractive brightness of gas-lit stalls, the vicious, poverty-stricken, and brutalised population of the Borough, swarmed forth to lay out the week's earnings in gin, or dainties for the Sunday's dinner. All the rotten, ill-drained, unventilated, sin-haunted courts and alleys that hide themselves away in dark corners lest their deeds should be reproved, poured forth their refuse. The Borough saturnalia began, and a series of repulsive noises filled the tainted air—cat-screams, joyless laughter, drunken songs and brutal oaths. Many were bent on business, and crowded round glassless butcher's shops, glutting their eyes on gory odds and ends of meat, or fought for places round glowing braziers where chestnuts and coffee were roasting, and booths where dark wheelks dissolved in clumsy shells. Others, apparently disapproving the "all work and no play" system of life, amused themselves by planting their backs against the walls and relentlessly chaffing the passers by, roaring now and then with appreciative laughter over such melancholy jests as the hideous dance of a drunken woman. It was a shifting, surging, unsightly crowd, in which the two extremes of mortal life were fearfully blended. The ghastly simplicity of second-childhood grinned from bleared eyes and toothless gums, and little faces, prematurely aged, expressed no joy or innocence of childhood, but



the sad wisdom which is taught by harsh experience. It was a mournful sight to see these children, growing up without love, reverence, or aspiration, to become in time decrepit and loathsome, and to moulder unregretted in their pauper graves. And if venerable age is fair to look upon, surely no ghastlier object could earth exhibit than old men like these, who tottering forward into the arms of death, still mouthed and glared, with a maudlin mockery of love's dumb language, at the young girls who passed them by. If there be indeed joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, surely angels must weep at such a sight as this; the flock of God shepherded by Satan, who on the foreheads of young and old, had plainly set his own fell marks of misery and debasement. Did any dim distant yearnings awake vaguely within these human hearts steeped in crime and ignorance? any impalpable influence stir from the far off glory-home whence their souls had come? any ripple from the pure Ocean of Life pulsate towards this stagnant pit which held no water? Had they learnt already to hug their chains? or did the fettered hands of these slaves of sin feebly lift themselves towards the freedom of their Native Land? Who can tell? yet who shall dare affirm that, if Love indeed be infinite, the vilest or most depraved is beyond the reach of saving hope!

Issuing from a large new church not far from the Elephant and Castle, were three persons, so strangely unlike the crowd with which they were about to mingle that it seemed as if they belonged to an altogether different order of creation—a fair deep-eyed child who looked like the spirit of Purity embodied passing with charmed life through the haunts of corruption, a man whose proudly formed features seemed to show long descent from the ruling classes, a clergyman, on whose brow thought and culture had set their mark.

Sir Kenelm Harold had taken Cicely to hear Mr. Daubeny preach a New Year's sermon in a Newington church, for the child had grown weary of a long birthday, dismally unlike the festivals of yore, spent within the narrow precincts of an East End parsonage. The walk and the bright service had occupied and refreshed her, but the little creature shuddered as leaving the well-lighted church, she emerged into the tumult of the crowded streets.

"Baby shall ride home in state," said Sir Kenelm, lifting her in his arms. "Lean your head on me, Cicely, and see if father doesn't make a good horse."

"That's very nice," said the child, nestling her head upon his shoulder. "But I am getting old, and it will make you tired to carry me. Mayn't we get into a carriage?"

Sir Kenelm shook his head.



"Father has no money for cabs, so now that we have sold our horses you must put up with a two-legged steed."

"No money? oh, poor father! I am sure Eddy's piebald pony would have stayed with us if he had known that, without wanting any servant to wait on him. He knows us so well, and was such a good little fellow."

The hubbub of the crowd and the roar of vehicles now drowned Cicely's childish voice, and ceasing her efforts to make herself heard, she lay quietly back in her father's strong arms, feeling happily secure in that refuge from all terrors of the streets. The trio moved on rapidly, and Daubeny, who frequently glanced sidelong at his companion's face, saw that Sir Kenelm walked with eyes fixed upon the ground, as though wholly unconscious of the ragged multitude that elbowed him. On London Bridge Cicely called to him to stop and let her look down at the river, and as in mechanical obedience, he leant over the parapet, Daubeny caught a look in his eyes that made him tremble—a look of fierce anguish and longing, as though in those dark, silent-ebbing waters there lay some heart-cure which he would fain have made his own. Daubeny grew uneasy—this look and the long silence were so unlike the manner in which his friend had borne himself during the first days of his bereavement—days in which the ice on his heart had seemed to break and to let long-frozen streams of ten-

darkness flow freely and cheeringly out to all around. It was impossible to leave his friend to be the prey of this mood without some effort to rouse him, and Daubeny was trying to think of any subject by which to open conversation, when Cicely came to his aid.

"Put me down, Daddy!" she cried, "you do hold me so tight; you hurt me!"

Sir Kenelm, absorbed in his own thoughts, paid no heed to the child's command, and she patted him gently on the cheek.

"Let her walk a little way," said Daubeny, touching his friend's arm. "It will do her good to stretch her legs."

"Don't the rooms look pretty, now, father, with all the beautiful china we bought in St. Paul's Churchyard this morning?" said Cicely merrily, as he set her on her feet. "You didn't seem so surprised as I thought you would, when we brought you in to see it. And, father, you promised us in the train that you would tell us stories every day in our new little house, that we might not be dull, and you have not told us one to-day, though it *was* my birthday."

"Come come, don't chatter incessantly!" said Sir Kenelm, with a sharpness so unusual that Cicely drooped her little head abashed. "How fond children are of talking!" he added irritably to Daubeny, "and it doesn't improve a headache!"

"You are rather hard on her," said Daubeny, crossing over from the child to Sir

Kenelm's side. "This is the first time she has spoken since we came out of church, and I think her reproaches are just. Thanks to your efforts, the move from home was made almost a journey of pleasure to the children, and they were all eager to carry out your schemes for making the new rooms pretty and cheerful, like the old ones at Rotherhame. This morning they clubbed together to buy penny ornaments, and worked hard at putting them up in hopes of surprising you; the doors were thrown open, you looked blankly at the walls, and walked off without any comment, except a chilling recommendation not to make the place untidy."

Sir Kenelm's heart smote him.

"Was I expected to admire?" he asked. "Poor little creatures! I am sorry if I hurt their feelings. But it's no use their learning to depend on me as if I were going to be their permanent companion. Why should I accustom myself to their sweet ways and loving kisses, when soon I shall be childless—robbed of all my little children—maybe never to see them again, or possibly, to return years hence and find them growing up to shrink from their father with horror and disgust?"

Sir Kenelm spoke fast and indistinctly, and kept his head averted.

"To be despised—hated by my own son and daughters," he went on, with a shudder of irrepressible agony. "Can you wonder, that knowing they will be branded all through

life with infamy as a *convict's* children, I recoil from the look of their innocent eyes, and that each accent of their little voices falls like a knife upon my nerves? My children! my poor, disgraced children!" he added passionately.

"I think I may venture to answer for it that you shall find your children loyal to you," said Daubeny, "perhaps even more tenderly dutiful to their father in his deep misfortunes than they could have shown themselves in days of hollow brightness and prosperity."

"And can you imagine that after they have come out of the schoolroom, where you have inculcated filial duty, and gone into the world, to see men and women recoil from them as if they were lepers, they will not ask the reason? No, my children must know that I have ruined them, and they are not the only persons who will curse the day that I was born. Let my victims console themselves by the reflection that I am more wretched than them all!"

Sir Kenelm's voice had in it a sound of such fierce pain that Daubeny's heart sank down within him.

"How comes it that you speak so differently to what you did?" he asked. "I hoped that you had made up your mind to trust yourself and your dear ones to Him, whose punishments are sent, not in wrath, but for the unending good of His creatures. Is it the part of a brave man to shrink so fearfully from pain

which, though sharp, has in it a purifying virtue?"

Sir Kenelm smiled bitterly.

"*A brave man!*—no, that I cannot pretend to be. I confess that in prospect of the fate before me I am an utter coward, Daubeny. I thought I had realised it all and was prepared to go through with it, but while the boy's life was on the balance it was an unreal, far-off phantom—all my thoughts for the future were bounded by the day of his death—and what lay beyond in the time when I had lost him, seemed to belong to another lifetime altogether. But now that we have turned our backs on Rotherhame, and entered on the new phase, the bandage is taken from my eyes, and I see my intolerable fate before me in its naked horror, drawing nearer with each gliding moment. I cannot hope for many more days of quiet. God has cursed me with the instincts and organization of a gentleman, and can you expect me calmly to contemplate the degradation to which they will put me? Why, do you know," he went on with increasing excitement, "that it is agony to me to be even in your presence?—you, whose imagination must often have travelled over the sickening details of my punishment, who have pictured me to yourself dressed in a hideous, servile livery, governed by servants, locked up, enslaved. There are times when I pray that they may condemn me as a murderer,

for however vile the death, I should at least get away and hide myself in darkness from the eyes that pursue me—eyes, eyes, everywhere, like flies settling to gloat upon an open wound! Just now when I looked into the river I thought how by one plunge I might deliver myself—how the cold water would rush in and drown my heart, and rinse it free from all the pride and pain and fear that clog it, and leave it an inert and painless lump of flesh, soaked through and through, quite dead!”

“For God’s sake, my dear friend!” exclaimed Daubeny, horror struck, “resist such temptations, as you value your salvation!”

“Have no fear,” and Sir Kenelm laughed the rather ghastly laugh with which he was wont to turn off any subject on which he had been betrayed into speaking too earnestly. “I am not going to bring a deeper damnation on myself by breaking the solemn promise ‘not to take to my heels,’ which good Mr. Bradshaw exacted of me, nor will I defraud him of his just due of sweet revenge. Besides, though I scarcely think the after-life can have tortures to exceed those I am doomed to suffer here, it has the disadvantage of longer duration. I am now near forty, so that even if I prove very tough I must be at least half-way through the time allotted to mortal man, and can see the limit of my penance. Do you think it may help to kill me?” he added anxiously, “surely it

would not be unnatural if life were shortened by such a strain on the endurance as I am to undergo."

"Such trials do undoubtedly make a deep drain on the stock of vigour given us for our journey through the world, but I do not say that I think it certain your life will be shortened—human nature has in it an alarming capacity for suffering, both mental and physical."

"And convict life is proverbially healthy," added Sir Kenelm, his quivering nostril showing his passionate inner recoil from the vile term "convict life." "Well, there are other hopes to fall back upon. I may go mad, or become an idiot, which latter alternative seems to me the most probable by the hopeless stupor which now often makes my brain a blank."

"Dear Sir Kenelm," said Daubeny, "you are wrong, entirely wrong, to look on your future as one of such unmixed degradation. I know of no nobler sight than a human soul voluntarily suffering shame for conscience' sake. To be the slave of one's passions, the victim of a worldly, selfish pride, a servile cringer before the opinion of men—this is indeed a bondage of the most degrading type, and we can never know true liberty till we have flung off our fetters, and can soar above the base objects to which we once bowed down. The really noble and

worthy part of man is his moral nature, and it matters little that our perishing bodies are enslaved if the soul is free."

"But *I* feel nothing of this freedom of which you are always talking," answered Sir Kenelm, irritably. "I am just as much the slave of my pride as ever I was, except that now it has acquired a new power to torture me. I have lost the humility and resignation and calm I hoped to possess, as some compensation for my miseries."

"Shall I tell you why? Because you made your sacrifice in a spirit of narrow bargaining with your God. Do not be incessantly thinking of how much you have given up for Him, and the exact ratio in which He is bound to repay you. God gave up *all* for us, and we grudge Him even the poor return of our most unworthy selves. Oh, Sir Kenelm, why should infamy be so hard for us to bear, when the Son of God, our Brother-Man and our Redeemer, stooped to the dust of degradation for our sakes? Just now, when you spoke of being forced to submit to the rule of common people, the thought rushed across me of Him, our Lord, insulted and struck by servants. And did not the world stare and gape upon His ignominious suffering with the very eyes—curious, half-pitying, half-scornful—that you so dread? Have you no ambition to show that in this unbelieving, unloving age, there are yet some who find it a secret joy

that they are allowed to share, so far as His sufferings were purely human, their Saviour's doom?"

Sir Kenelm's face wore a reverent look as Daubeny said these words. His was a nature of quick, responsive instincts, and his friend seemed already to have lifted him from an atmosphere of egotistic pain into a higher and purer region.

"I hardly dare speak of Him," he answered softly, "and so awful has the contrast seemed to me between His bright holiness and my warped, unlovely nature, that I have, perhaps, driven the very thought of Him from me more entirely than I ought. If I could keep my eyes fixed on Him, as you would in my place, I might face my fate almost with indifference, but it is hard to do this with the shadow of self rising up perpetually before one's eyes. Oh, Daubeny, this life of ours is a strange, incomprehensible, contradictory thing, and our Mother Church must have looked far ahead indeed when she bade us give thanks for our creation!"

"She looks with clear eyes into the eternal future, which, as Ralph said, will 'bring all right at last!' Now, my dear Sir Kenelm, if you have any real friendship for me, you must promise that, when we are parted, you will not give up prayer, nor the daily endeavour to be patient and courageous."

"I made that promise, or one like it, to

"Geraldine," said Sir Kenelm in a low voice. "It was all—the last thing—I could do for her, and I scarcely know whether I gave the pledge in words or only in thought. But be that as it may, I will endeavour to redeem it. You have given me new courage, and I will try, if possible, to leave only happy impressions behind me on my poor orphaned children. By the way, I trust *she* has understood nothing!" and he glanced with sudden apprehension at the little figure by his side, whose trotting feet tried bravely to keep up with the long masculine strides of himself and Daubeney.

"Oh, no! It would have been impossible for her to hear us through all this noise."

"Daubeney," said Sir Kenelm, "I believe you are the only man in the world who would openly befriend or associate with a person in my position. Even she who loved me best gave me up when she found out what I was, but nothing ever changes the constancy of your unselfish friendship. The debt I owe you no words can express."

"I cannot take much credit to myself," said Daubeney tenderly. "Somehow or other, whatever your demerits, you possess the faculty of making yourself loved. Without you and yours, life would have little attraction for me."

The trio had now passed out of the noisy thoroughfares into the deserted back streets of the City—streets in which at night

one is environed by a solitude profound as if one were in the heart of the country. They met no one, the lamps were few and far between, and the dank stirring of the rank, coarse grass through the rusty railings of a long-closed churchyard was only dimly visible.

Sir Kenelm took Cicely again in his arms.

"I am afraid I was cross to you just now, darling," he said, "but you must forgive poor father, for the streets were noisy, and he had a headache."

Cicely kissed her father with easily restored cheerfulness, and Sir Kenelm further consoled her by bidding her talk all the way home as much as she liked.

"You know I enjoy being talked to," he said. "Ralph used to tell me all his secrets when he was a little boy, and go on chattering till I sometimes thought he would have no voice left."

Cicely paused.

"He didn't say much when he was dying," she said at last. And after pondering a moment she added: "But now he can sing very well, and sometimes, when me and Eddy are in bed, we think we can hear his voice sounding high up in the stars above the wind. Oh! there is the man I like best in all London," she added, with a cry of glee; "the muffin man with his pretty bell. Oh, father, do buy some!"

"Well, I think I must, for who knows;

"we may not be together another birthday? Have you any money about you, Daubeney?"

Daubeney produced some coppers, and while he was making the purchase Sir Kenelm crossed the street to read a flaring newspaper handbill posted on the door of an opposite shop. When he returned, his companion saw by the lamplight that his face wore a pale and startled look.

The three turned the corner, and there, within sight of the leafless trees and square pepper boxes of the grim old Tower, up an old-fashioned winding street, stood a smoky-looking red brick house, fronted by a plot of blackened grass. The windows were unshuttered, and, lit up by the red fire-light within, the interior was distinctly visible. Daubeney drew out his latch-key, and paused with Sir Kenelm to look on the scene within. The small parlour was scantily, perhaps rather meanly furnished, but yet wore an air of home-like comfort. There were sprays of holly on the few sacred pictures, and on the common ware plates and cups with which the walls were garnished. Sitting in the armchair by the fire, Granny in her mourning gown, with Lettice by her side and little Philippa on her lap, watched with evident amusement the gesticulations of Edward, who, copying the footman at the Castle, was setting the tea things, with puffed cheeks and an air of solemn importance.

Cicely, delighted to rejoin her playmates, uttered a joyful cry, and the next moment Edward had dashed down the milk jug and was opening the front door to welcome in his sister from the fog and darkness.

"What made you look so strange," said Daubeny, detaining Sir Kenelm as he was about to follow his children, "just now, after you read that handbill? You had seen no bad news, I trust? Nothing," he went on, with slight hesitation, "that concerns yourself?"

Sir Kenelm looked at him with grave eyes.

"Daubeny," he answered, "that handbill announces that *Lady Rotherhame is dead*."

"Good God! When and how?"

Sir Kenelm's reply was interrupted by a touch upon his arm, and, turning suddenly, he saw behind him a tall, stout man wrapped in a great-coat.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said civilly. "Is either of you Sir Kenelm Harold?"

"I am," replied Sir Kenelm, and a wild look, such as a fox might wear when the hounds come up with him, shot into his eyes.

"Then I am afraid I must ask you to come with me, sir. I have a warrant for your arrest!"

A sudden faintness crept over Daubeny, and he leaned against the wall.

Sir Kenelm asked, a little sternly—

"On what charge?"

"Wilful murder of Simon Marley, *alias* Weedon," replied the official in a lowered voice.

Sir Kenelm stood for a moment with his back against the house door, his face very pale, his lips stern and set. Daubeny looked at him, but did not dare do as he longed, and lay his hand within his arm. Two more figures advanced softly at the same moment from different sides of the street, and took up their position at the foot of the steps. There was a short silence.

"Very well," said Sir Kenelm drily at last, "I am ready to go with you."

"I had better call a cab, sir, had I not?" said the police inspector, a little awed by his manner.

"As you please!"

He turned his back on the gaslit hall, and on the official who had followed him within its shelter, and stood looking out into the wild dark evening. Unconsciously his eyes rested on the clouds which, with free silent motion, were chasing one another over the faces of the stars. A longing for freedom, passionate and profound, seized him—a fierce longing ere it was too late, and the prison bolts were grating on him, to break down the petty barriers which stood between him and liberty. He thought of the fine web of secret agencies with which the law entraps and circumvents its victims, and his breast heaved and

panted as though the dread machinery were actually crushing his bones. Yes, in all the great city, in all the acres of his motherland, there was no spot where he could elude its gripe—not one, unless it might be that dark river, whose enticing, murky ripples he seemed even now to see—the river which one minute's swift running would enable him to reach, on whose cold bosom he might sleep sound that night, secure and undisturbed.

The parlour door opened suddenly, and a chorus of young voices was heard eagerly asking for "father."

Sir Kenelm started as if he had been shot, and his hand shook with sudden nervousness. But he stopped 'Daubeny when he saw him going towards them with solemn trepidation on his face, and said authoritatively—

"Go and have your tea without waiting for me, children. I have business with this gentleman, and must go out."

"But you'll come back soon, Fardie darling, won't you?" said little Edward, clasping his hand. "Muffins for tea to-night, you know."

"Not very soon," returned his father. "Go back to the table."

He watched the little curly head as it disappeared within the doorway; he cast one glance at the firelit room, the white cloth, the steaming urn, and the innocent, unconscious faces gathered round the table. He

signed imperatively to Daubeny to go in to them ; then, closing the door with his own hand upon them all, he turned his face once more to the dark world out of doors, and said to the police-officer—

“ I follow you ! ”

Daubeny, as he stood among the children, trying to answer naturally their many questions, heard the cab roll from the door, and knew that henceforward they were orphans.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Beggars mounted run their horse to death.

SHAKESPEARE.


Ring out wild bells to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light,
The year is dying in the night :
Ring out wild bells and let him die.
Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow.

TENNYSON.

IN order to explain Sir Kenelm's announcement to Daubeny, we must put back the hands of old Time's Dial a little way, and call up again the ghost of the departed year, 18—, a year so richly eventful to the persons who pass across our story's stage. Once more, before it drops finally, the curtain shall rise on Rotherhame Castle, and we will judge for ourselves how the familiar rooms look in the new hands to which they have passed. It has been a great day in the annals of Rotherhame. The little Countess has made her entry, and her Castle has put off its mourning for the dead. Not even a hatchment on the gateway reminds the passer-by that within the last four-and-twenty hours a coffin has been carried beneath its arch, that honour being properly reserved by the present authorities for such as bear a nearer kinship to the head of the family than second-cousinhood.

Fires blaze cheerily from every oriel and arrowslit of the many-towered building, the state apartments have been unlocked, holland coverings removed from paintings and chandeliers, flags decorate the pointed roof of the Great Hall, and the servants have adorned the steps on which their little mistress first set foot with ferns and gorgeous hot-house flowers. All traces of the former inhabitants that could be swept away have disappeared. Naught remains to them of all the broad acres that once were theirs but a few feet of earth in the churchyard, and, spite of all efforts to lighten their gloom, the old walls wear a sinister and unsmiling air, as if, conscious of their own unchanging constancy, they would frown stern disapproval on the ruthless freaks of fickle Fortune.

It had been decided that the rejoicings attendant on the young Countess's first state visit to her domain should take place on the Monday after her arrival, so the tenantry who swarmed at the station to welcome their lady, and themselves draw her carriage home, were consoled for being turned back at the drawbridge by the prospect of the immense banquet to be held in two days, to which a thousand guests were invited, and at which Lady Rotherhame was to preside in person. Half-a-dozen sturdy yeomen were, however, allowed to enter the enclosure that, in default of the horses they had superseded, their



strong arms might draw her ladyship's carriage to her door, and these privileged persons stood with uncovered heads to watch the bright-haired child as Mr. Middleton led her tenderly across the threshold. Mrs. Bradshaw and Carry kept close behind her, and saluted the bystanders with the gracious condescension of conscious royalty. The servants had mostly assembled in the courtyard to salute their mistress, so that within the hall she found no one to greet her but Mr. Parsons and two gigantic footmen. It was chilling to come out of the bustle and excitement of expectation into this oppressive, unsympathetic silence; the expressionless decorum of the three serving men was but a sorry welcome after all, and Dolly looked round with a vague longing for some loving smile or friendly voice to make the great solemn house more homelike. But her eyes fell instead on rows of ancestral portraits, from whose gold frames her dead forefathers looked down with stony gaze upon her solitude.

Involuntarily she shivered, and in a whisper asked her Uncle Middleton how it was that the eyes of all the pictures seemed to follow her as she walked.

"That is always the case when you get a really first-rate painter," he explained. "It is a great test of skill. I think you ought to be very proud of possessing such works of art, little woman!"

"Dear me," said Anna, "which way are we to go? I am sure I shall never find my way about in this immense place," but Mrs. Bradshaw cut her short by treading on her toe, and tried to look as if she had been born and bred within a feudal castle.

Little was said as the Countess and her party followed the servants to the Red Drawing Room, where the folding doors, flung wide open, revealed such a blaze of gold and crimson as had never dazzled their eyes before. Middleton, conscious of his own incongruity with his stately surroundings, could not fail to observe that his companions matched them yet worse. Dolly, even, though in her rich silk frock and plumed hat she looked like a princess, startled him by dusting with her cambric handkerchief the high backed ebony chair on which she was about to sit—a remnant of cottage breeding which fortunately escaped her aunt's notice. The new comers all stood about awkwardly, and made laboured attempts at conversation. Unconscious reverence for the magnificent upholstery of their new drawing-room kept them from raising their voices above their breath. Every one seemed afraid of expressing admiration or interest, lest the domestics should imagine that a grand house was a novelty to them, and whether it was that the air of the old Castle was chilly, or that the unwontedness of their situation oppressed them, certain it is that a shadow had passed

over the spirits of the little party, who had so long anticipated this triumphant moment with an intensity of ambitious impatience. Dolly herself seemed the most cast down of all; she sat a moment listening to the drear moan of the wind in the fir-trees without, and then, as if conscious that she was lonely, and that an object to love was a necessity, she suddenly held out her arms to her Uncle Bradshaw. Mr. Bradshaw, startled by the unusual demonstration, returned the child's embrace with a series of small kisses that sounded like falling drops of putty, and said in a tone of resolute cheerfulness—

“So here we are in our new home at last, my dear! You will have a deal to look at, but rest before anything. Let the inspection of your bedrooms be your first business, ladies. I am glad that after our long journey we are to have a quiet evening—the Bogles, of course, we do not regard as company.”

Middleton whispered to Dolly to say a kind word to the servants, and hastening after them as they were about to leave the room, the Countess, to the horror of her female relatives, held out her little hand to the footman.

“Mr. Curtis,” she said, in high plaintive accents, “I remember you very well! You used often to come and give me bull’s-eye when I lived at the cottage.”

The ghost of a smile hovered on Curtis’s well-trained lips at this inappropriate remin-

iscence, and a furious pinch from Caroline, warning her that she had been guilty of a breach of etiquette, she hastily retreated to her Uncle Middleton, cutting short by this sudden move an elaborate speech of congratulation, prepared by Parsons for the august occasion.

It had been arranged that the hungry travellers were to dine immediately after their arrival in the privacy of their own apartments, that Dolly was to have a sleep, and that at half-past seven the Rector's family was to be admitted to help make the evening merry. At the appointed hour accordingly a large family party gathered in the Great Hall, at each end of which an immense fire was burning. Without the wind wandered wearily, sighing behind the curtained windows like a homeless outcast pleading for shelter, but within all was comfort and brightness. It was New Year's Eve, a fitting time to take leave of an old life and begin a new, and child though she was, the heiress of Rotherhame could not part without grave thoughts from a year which had wrought such momentous changes in her fortune, which had risen on her a pauper orphan, dependent on cold charity for daily bread, and which was about to leave her the successor of twenty earls, the owner of fifty thousand broad acres. Noting the melancholy expression in the child's eyes, and knowing her fondness for a game

of romps, Middleton proposed blindman's buff. Beneath the reviving influence of this exciting amusement, Dolly's gloom soon vanished in a burst of spirits, and she began to rush wildly about, knocking her head against the furniture without the least remorse, and laughing with a glee that was contagious. Carry's taste had robed her in a white satin frock, flounced with lace, and twined a wreath of artificial rosebuds in her hair, and this dress, so unsuited to her age, accorded surprisingly well with her peculiar style of beauty. Ellen and Mary Bogle, whose sallow faces wore a look of heavy importance, played with and caressed her with a boldness which was really astonishing, considering that she actually stood in the very shoes of the awful Earl, before whom the sisters had been used to tremble. Robert was in a state of supreme felicity, showering broad compliments upon Mrs. Bradshaw, or weaving schemes of future greatness with his betrothed beneath the mistletoe. The first meeting of the loving pair had taken place out of doors. Carry, on her arrival, had found a note on her boudoir table, begging her to give Robert a kiss in the privacy of the garden, and on her way back to the Castle, leaning on his arm, they had encountered Mr. and Mrs. Meules, who had been hovering about the premises all the afternoon. Carry had acknowledged the presentation of the Curate and his wife with distinguished

hauteur, and had held forth dim hopes that they might one day be admitted further to her presence in the Castle. Prosperity certainly had not so far affected Miss Bradshaw beneficially, and the stiff contemptuous manner in which she treated Robert's family, made even the good-natured Alice Barnes indignant, so that, withdrawing herself promptly from the conceited young lady, she devoted all her energies to make the evening cheerful for the "young folks." Her chirruping good-nature quickly won the accessible heart of Dolly, and she was ever at hand to pour oil on the troubled waters when Dr. Bogle laid down the law in too masterful a manner, or too unguardedly betrayed his scorn of Mr. Bradshaw's Puritan opinions. On one point the clerical brethren were agreed, and that was in preferring the—to Robert—milk-and-water amusements of post and blind-man's buff to dancing pure and simple. Mr. Bradshaw, who never cordially approved of dancing, in particular objected to that giddy pastime, on the last night of the Old Year, and Dr. Bogle himself was averse to seeing the Vigil of the Circumcision fooled away in twirling round like teetotums.

The whole Rectory party was present to-night, with the single exception of Miss Oliver, who had been purposely excluded from the general invitation, as it was of course hardly to be expected that "Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw of the Castle," should associ-

ate on equal terms with a *ci-devant* governess. To do the Doctor justice, the pomp and splendour of his present close connection with the Countess had hitherto proved powerless to shake his allegiance to the amiable old lady, for whom, in his own way, he had a sincere affection; and he might have been a little unwilling to concur in her pointed exclusion, had it not been that Miss Oliver herself was eager to delay the trying ordeal of seeing her old home in the hands of its new masters.

Mrs. Bradshaw, wrapped gracefully in a shawl of pure white lace, reclined on a couch at one end of the hall, receiving passively the obsequious attentions of Dolly's new French governess, and occasionally rousing herself to snub her niece, whom she liked none the better for having become a countess. Dolly, though perfectly tractable with any one she loved, had no manner of toleration for her aunt, whose numberless little injustices she had always repaid by a sturdily expressed aversion. But this night, perhaps from a certain sense of loneliness, the little girl seemed to cling to every one to whom she had been used, becoming conscious even of a softening sensation of kindness towards the detested Mrs. Bradshaw; and it was not till her aunt had bestowed on her an ill-tempered reprimand for presuming to express wonder that the servants were not in mourning, that Dolly's mood reverted to enmity. Of all the

many assembled round her that evening, Mrs. Bradshaw and her daughter were the only ones who expressed any illfeeling towards her. But more cruel than any personal slight appeared to the child's mind the unfeeling manner in which her aunt spoke of her dead friend, forbidding her to call him Lord Berkeley, and saying that he had never had any business to be in the Castle at all, and that it was not likely that they should put their servants into black for him.

"I love him," said Dolly, the ready tears rushing to her eyes. "He was very kind to me, and I should like to wear a crape frock to show that I am sorry, and weeds in my hair, as cousin Carry said you did when your first husband died."

"Come, come, we can't have you crying and making your pretty eyes all red and swelled to-night," said Middleton, chucking her under the chin. "Only see what a splendid supper has been got ready for you, and here am I to conduct your Ladyship to the table, if you will condescend to take my arm."

Middleton's ruse was successful, and when he had placed the young Countess in the carved oak chair at the head of the table on the dais, her attention was speedily absorbed by the magnificent collation under which it groaned. "Did you ever see such a good feast in your life before?" she broke out, in the

middle of Mr. Bradshaw's grace. Turkeys, pheasants, pies, jellies, ices, grapes—they needed all one's powers of mind to choose aright between such dainties, and still further distracted by the complimentary toasts and speeches that assailed her from all parts of the table, Dolly scarcely heeded the mournful recurring clang of the church bell, as it tolled out its slow dirge for the dying year.

"I wish to goodness they would not kick up that lugubrious row to-night," said Robert who was in nowise disposed for moral reflections on the lapse of time. "They ought to do nothing but chime now that Dolly and you have come down."

"Never mind," said Dr. Bogle, "we shall have a first-rate peal by-and-bye, when the New Year comes in, and a lot more to-morrow as well, in honour of our little Lady of the Manor. Come, give me a kiss, my pet, and thank me for making you a pretty speech."

Dolly hastily complied, looking uneasily the while at the Doctor's large jaw and big, strong teeth, as if she apprehended a bite.

"Does the school belong to me, now?" she asked, by an unspoken sequence of ideas, recalling the old days at the parish school, where the Doctor had enforced the rudiments of theology on his rustic scholars by the stern aid of the scourge of discipline.

"The school! to be sure it does!" he answered heartily, "and the mistress's house, and all the cottages the children come from

too! Why, what a lot of good you ought to do, to be sure!"

"Then I'll go in there to-morrow and burn the cane, and give the children leave to do anything they like," said Dolly decisively.

"How intolerably stuck up Miss Dora is getting!" whispered Carry to her mother, jealous beyond bearing of the observance paid to her despised cousin, whose honours she herself had once hoped to wear. "Her head will be completely turned if you don't manage to take her down a peg or two mamma."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Mrs. Bradshaw, with shuddering disgust, "she had better not treat *me* to her airs and graces, that's all! She'll have to learn that I'm mistress here."

Mirth waxed high round the festive board, and in the general rejoicing there was but one discordant element. One being who belonged to a past epoch in the history of Rotherhame Castle looked with a scowling eye on the inauguration of a new era, and sat apart from the merry-makers, hugging himself in misanthropic isolation. This being was Oscar, the faithful bloodhound whom Sir Kenelm had left behind him in charge of his son's grave, who pined hourly for the wonted caress of his beloved master, and who had suffered both in spirits and temper from the forlornness of his situation. Oscar, himself of a pure and matchless breed, had a weakness for good blood; and, discerning,

perhaps, the inferior birth of the new-comers, found it doubly hard to tolerate their presence. His accustomed resting place upon the hearthrug having been usurped by Tiny, Mrs. Bradshaw's fat, yellow lap-dog, Oscar lay stretched, in gloomy silence, by the window, peering out through half-closed eyes at the noisy party round the supper table. There he might have remained harmlessly enough had not the jealous deity of the Bradshaw household objected to the presence even of his superior. Thinking to drive him out by dint of persistent teasing, Tiny trotted over to his rival, and jumping heavily about him, snapped and barked with tormenting pertinacity. Oscar was great and he was gentle, but when Tiny at last, emboldened by his majestic disregard, fastened his sharp fangs in his leg, the bloodhound slowly turned his large head, lifted the terrified animal in his mouth from the ground, and without inflicting any injury, calmly held him captive. The next moment, with shrieks of dismay, and followed by the gallant Robert, Mrs. Bradshaw and Caroline arrived to the rescue of their darling.

"Nasty, beastly brute!" yelled the elderly lady, as with courage worthy of a better cause she attacked the hound with slaps and pinches.

Oscar, releasing his trembling prisoner, turned upon the ladies with a low, ominous growl, avenged by Robert with a kick.

"Take care, take care; don't irritate the monster!" cried Caroline, nervously catching at his sleeve. "I do believe it is the same horrible creature that gave me such a turn when papa and I were here last winter. Make the footman drive him out, Bob! Don't touch him yourself. Papa must have him shot to-morrow."

So Oscar was hunted forth with execrations, which were, perhaps, not altogether undeserved, for he had shown himself very surly towards his new masters. Before the door had closed upon him, however, Dolly had struggled down from her elevated seat, scampered along the Hall, and fearless of his growl, thrown her arms caressingly about his neck. Oscar drew back, surveyed his small mistress intently, sniffed at her frock, and then, as if he recognized the old race, slowly and gravely extended his paw towards her. Dolly shook hands, and this solemn ceremony over, the bloodhound stretched himself at her feet and closed his eyes with a satisfied sigh, while she, again hugging him vigorously, whispered in his ear—

"Oh you darling old fellow; you are nicer than anybody else here. I wish you were my uncle!"

"Return to your seat, Dora, this instant!" exclaimed her aunt, imperiously; "I will not allow you to be pulling that dirty, old animal about. He shall be got rid of to-

morrow, before he's had a chance of giving us hydrophobia all round. And my poor Ti-ti," she added, with a fond smile, "it sa'nt be bullied any more, it sa'nt; pitty, pitty, pitty fellow! Come back, child; don't you hear me speak?"

With a look of speechless indignation Dolly let go her friend, and unwillingly returned to the table, resolved to demand Oscar's life of her uncle when she should get the chance of speaking to him in private.

"I was taking another glance at the chapel to-night," remarked Mr. Bradshaw, turning on Dr. Bogle with a bland, unpleasant smile. "I do not know whether its internal arrangements meet with *your* approval, but I really thought, on first entering, that I was in a Roman Catholic place of worship."

The Doctor glared apprehensively.

"O, dear!" he said, "you will have the whole country down upon you if you touch the chapel. It's the admiration of the neighbourhood, and full of archæological interest. There's no need for you to use it, you know, if you prefer a simpler style of arrangement for your little private offices."

"Something, I think, must be done," responded Mr. Bradshaw, with decision, "for I shall wish occasionally to utilise it when we have a houseful for family prayers, or even for a religious meeting; and that would be impossible in its present objectionable condition."

Suddenly the great door at the further end of the Hall swung upon its hinges.

"Who was that?" asked Mr. Middleton, as every head turned.

Parsons, who was arranging the wine upon the sideboard at that end of the Hall, went instantly to the door and looked out.

"There's no one here, sir," he replied; "the fastenings is old, and the door often blows open when the wind gets high."

"Oh, is that it?" said Middleton; "we must not forget to have it repaired, for the draught is enough to cut one in two. Shut it carefully, please Parsons, and make up the fire."

Parsons obeyed, but a piercing blast had rushed in through the opening, and there was a general sound of shivering and chattering of teeth. However, it was not long before the buzz of conversation recommenced, and no one seemed to have leisure to observe how pale and startled the little Countess looked. She was naturally an imaginative child, and her fancy began to run riot among all sorts of horrors which she would rather have died than name. Midnight was drawing near, and while the muffled strokes of the church bell tolled out the last minutes of the year, the uproar of jest and laughter began to sound almost profane. But without the night seemed conscious that a mighty spirit was about to pass. Dark shadows from flitting cloud and wailing tree gathered

thickly on the snow, like phantoms of the dead Old Years that had gone to be with the years before the Flood; the heather whispered a low *Profiscere*, and the wind's sigh seemed the struggling gasp of an ending life.

"It is getting awfully late," said Caroline, presently. "I am sure, mamma, it is high time for Dora to be in bed."

"Oh, don't say that, Carry!" exclaimed the child, imploringly.

She had by this time worked herself up into a fever of nervous fright.

Carry's only answer was to repeat her appeal to her mother.

"What time is it?" said Mrs. Bradshaw. "Ten minutes to twelve! You don't say so, Car! Rise, Dora, and wish your uncle and myself good-night."

"Yes, it will never do for her to have pale cheeks on Monday when she receives her tenants," said the Doctor. "And look here, my pet, before you go, I want to tell you that my girls have got up a little party for Twelfth Night, and we shan't think it any fun at all if you don't honour us with your presence. We shall have no dancing, as you can't dance, but plenty of games and conjuring tricks."

"A great deal better than dancing," put in Mr. Bradshaw, significantly.

"Papa does talk such egregious nonsense when he gets on questions of society," said

Carry to Robert, *sotto voce*. "I'm not going to stand seeing that child a dowdy goody-goody. Why, at her age I could dance like a ballet-girl, and mamma and I intend to give her first-rate lessons as soon as we are settled in St. Jerome's House for the season."

"Wont he just open his eyes though when he sees you going off in your brougham to balls and operas!" said Robert, giggling.

"We must begin with Buckingham Palace," said Carry, with a toss of the head. "I shall be presented at the very first Drawing-room, and, of course, shall be invited to the Queen's Ball directly after. He'll hardly be so disloyal as to object to that; and before May's out, he'll find that what with two or three balls a night, Rotten Row in the morning, and driving and calls of an afternoon, we haven't a spare minute to listen to his lectures on the wicked world."

"And there'll be the trousseau to get too; don't forget that!" said Robert, who already found that his bride-elect did not refer to their approaching wedding so often, or in terms of such glowing anticipation as in the earlier days of their engagement.

"Goodness me!" burst in Mrs. Bradshaw sharply, "what are you hanging about for still, child? I know what it is! It is that old senseless folly about being afraid of the dark."

"Est'ce que moi j'accompagnerai la chère enfant, madame?" enquired the governess,

half-rising, and pitying the poor child's weebegone expression.

"Certainly not, Mademoiselle! It is quite preposterous to give way to fancies of that kind. I have already told the Countess they are to be got over, and get over them she shall!"

"O, but please, aunt," said Dolly, her lips beginning to quiver, "I don't want to go to bed—I have a particular reason—I can't go up alone!"

"Dora," returned her aunt, "when I speak I mean to be obeyed. You have been very uppish all day!"

"O, but I'll be so good to-morrow," cried Dolly, clasping her hands in supplication, "very good, aunt, if only you will be kind this once."

"Kind!" ejaculated Mrs. Bradshaw. "That's a nice way to speak to me, who have been more than a mother to you. Well, I can say no more, my poor nerves won't stand all this noise and disputing. Mr. Bradshaw will you interfere?"

Thus urged Mr. Bradshaw girded up his loins—

"Dolly, my love, you must do as you are bid. What is the matter, child? Why should you look so scared?"

"O, uncle," said Dolly, throwing her arms suddenly round his neck, "I don't know how it is, but I do feel frightened, I don't want to go alone; I am frightened, very frightened!"

Mr. Bradshaw glanced doubtfully at his wife, and a look of mystified uneasiness appeared on the faces of all present, Mrs. Bradshaw's alone excepted.

"Nonsense," she said, "do not encourage her in such affectation. Dora knows my rule, that she is to go to bed by herself every night till she is cured of all that folly. It is an old trick of hers to invent some absurd excuse for not obeying."

"Come, my love," said Mr. Bradshaw rather unwillingly, "you really must not give way to these fancies. You are tired and over-excited and need a good sleep to set you to rights."

Children are usually secret as the grave on any subject which moves them deeply, and it must have been under no light pressure that the little girl had relinquished her natural reticence. But she knew too well the immovable stubbornness of her aunt's will to dispute it further. She heaved a long sigh, murmured reproachfully, "O, Aunt Caroline!" and having wished a general good-night, passed with unwilling lingering footsteps down the Great Hall, her slight form, veiled in fair curls, growing smaller and more shadowlike as she flitted onward through grim rows of pictured ancestors. Two footmen flung open the doors, and as she passed them she paused, and once more cast a wistful glance back at the gay scene she had quitted. Then Parsons placed a

lighted candle in her hand, and she was gone. Ah ! shortsightedness of mortal man, who with elaborate care weaves himself the net in which his feet are to be entangled !

Dolly had scarcely left the hall when the clock struck twelve with measured beat, and at the same time the tolling from the church tower ceased, and there was a pause for the bells to be unmuffled. Champagne went round, and Dr. Bogle, in his loudest key, called upon the company to drink prosperity to the New Year, and all good wishes to the young couple whom it would soon make man and wife.

"Hear, hear," cried Middleton, rousing himself from the abstraction into which his sister's act of discipline had thrown him.

He drank the health of Robert and Caroline with peculiar fervour, for his shrewd eye had not failed to perceive that his sister's satisfaction at her daughter's engagement was less demonstrative than it had been three months since.

"And another toast must not be omitted," said Mr. Bradshaw, unrolling the titles with unctuous satisfaction. "Ladies and gentlemen all, long life to my beloved niece, the youthful Countess of Rotherhame and Berkeley."

Scarcely had the words passed his lips—when a loud, sharp cry was heard, instantaneously followed by the sound of a heavy fall. Urged by an impulse of nameless

dread, both Mr. Bradshaw and Dr. Bogle sprang to their feet, Mr. Bradshaw, as though anxious to hide his sudden panic even from himself, saying in a tone of forced composure—

“What a startling demonstration! I think, if you don’t mind, I will go and ascertain what it means.”

A general silence ensued, and Mr. Bradshaw, with quickened uneasiness, hurried forward, followed closely by Middleton and the Bogles, father and son. They passed into the armoury, whence ascended a winding staircase, the short cut to the bedrooms in the Ruby Tower,—one which had been little used by the Harold children, as the stone passage at its head, a broad ledge projecting from the wall, was unguarded by any balustrade. The Doctor held out his candle, and peered into the obscurity that hung about the steps, the grinning casques and empty coats of mail upon the walls; while Mr. Bradshaw called aloud, in a voice which, in spite of all efforts to control it, sounded oddly tremulous—

“Dolly, Dolly, where are you? Come back, my love, I want you!”

His ear was strained, but it heard no answering voice, and at the same moment a gleam of something white upon the floor caught his eye. Snatching the light from Dr. Bogle’s hand, he started forward. By this time the ladies, whom his nervousness

infected strangely, had come up. Mr. Bradshaw turned on them an ashy face, and cried—

“Keep them back, Bogle! keep them back—Mabel, I beg you to return to the Hall!”

Awe-struck by his manner, the ladies were about to obey, when Mrs. Bradshaw, with a gasp of horror, caught sight of a little golden head wreathed with rosebuds, shattered and bathed in blood. Dr. Bogle was on his knees in a moment raising it, and Robert, with purple cheeks, placed his hand upon the silent pulse.

“No use, my boy,” said the Doctor, hoarsely, shaking his head, “no use trying that, the little thing is stone dead.”

An hysterical wail rose from the ladies, a confused hubbub from the servants who had gathered behind them, and at the same moment a resonant peal of bells, bursting upon the frosty midnight, rang in the glad New Year.

Mrs. Bradshaw gave signs of an approaching fainting fit, and Mademoiselle, losing all self-control, burst out into violent hysterics. Anna's calmness did not altogether desert her, and aided by the trembling Alice Barnes, she succeeded in forcing back the agitated women into the shelter of the Banqueting Hall.

Meanwhile Parsons drew near, and assisting the gentlemen to make some further examin-

ation of his ill-fated young mistress, concurred in their conviction that life had fled. Indeed there was no room to doubt the fact that little Dolly had died a sudden, violent, and unnatural death, for one side of the head was smashed in, and almost every bone of the small body seemed to be broken. Lifting her at last with a shrinking touch, in which pity seemed outweighed by horror, Dr. Bogle and Parsons bore the shattered remains of the child, who five minutes ago had been full of life and health, to the dark library, where, laying her upon the bare table, they presently left her alone to await the morrow's inquest. Then, one by one, they stole fearfully back into the Hall, where the ladies huddled together, pale, exhausted, and terror-stricken.

The whole party stood round the fire, and stared vacantly into the dull, glowing embers. There was a long, long silence, which no one dared nor knew how to break. This ghastly catastrophe mocked each heart in turn by its apparent impossibility, its irrevocable certainty. Mingling with worthier emotions, when the first extremity of horror and dismay had passed, surged up in secret selfish lamentations, as the Bradshaw family grasped the fact that they were now mere inmates on sufferance of the splendid dwelling they had that evening made their own. In one fatal moment their elaborate and gorgeous future had collapsed. They were no longer per-

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sonages of note or consequence, and the world which had grovelled to them would now watch with malicious enjoyment their humiliating fall. Mr. Bradshaw was no longer master, nor Mrs. Bradshaw mistress of Rotherhame Castle, with its train of obsequious servants. They were not wanted there, and the sooner they should go the better for the present owner. Ashamed at such a moment to give utterance to their selfish sorrow, each waited for the other to speak, till after a time Mr. Bradshaw, to whose shallow soul silence was an intolerable ordeal, ejaculated feebly—

“This is terrible indeed—most terrible!”

The ice once broken, speech became easier to the others.

“We did very wrong,” said Dr. Bogle, in a trembling voice, “to let the poor darling go upstairs alone. When I heard her speak in that strange, nervous way, I felt as if it were almost cruel, or to say the least, unwise, to turn a deaf ear to her pleadings. She must have been feeling overstrained and out of sorts—I had noticed it from the moment when that door in the Hall flew open so suddenly—and probably she started at some fancied terror, and missed her footing.”

“I have often told you, Mabel,” said Mr. Bradshaw, addressing his wife with an asperity for which he had never before found courage, “that your obstinacy would bring chstisement upon you; it was most un-

seemly to close your ears to the dear child's urgent entreaties."

"If you thought so, why did you not speak?" began Mrs. Bradshaw, but her utterance was choked by a stormy sob, and she fell back into her seat.

Henry Middleton had sat apart from his companions at a table in the background, his face buried in his hands. He had been trying in thought to follow the soul of his friend's child in its mysterious flight, endeavouring to trace the passage of the frail bark as it went out into the night, upon the dark ocean that washes round our mortal life. The voices of his relations recalled him suddenly, he looked up and spoke in solemn tones.

"Do not let us desecrate this hour by vain recriminations," he said. "It is God's hour. He has been among us, and has lessened our number, and has shown us the vanity of earthly hopes and schemes, and our complete helplessness in His hands. 'Except the Lord keep the house, their labour is but lost that build it.'"

His words were succeeded by another deep silence. Mr. Bradshaw even, perhaps struck by the true ring of his brother-in-law's speech, for once kept his electro-plate religion to himself. The Doctor alone emitted the groan of perfunctory assent which propriety demanded.

"How much," resumed Middleton, rising,

and joining the group round the fire, "how much have I not hoped and toiled and ventured for this dear child! And now at the very moment when success beyond all expectations had crowned my efforts, and I was looking forward to the reward of seeing her grow up to carry out her father's dearest wishes, and to be the joy and companion of my solitary life, one little act of unkindness cancels all, and leaves me a prey for ever to aching regret. Why did I not force you to listen to her entreaties, Mabel? You, no doubt, believed you were acting for her good, but little as I know of children, my instinct warned me you were wrong. Don't distress yourself by useless self-reproach," he continued, as through the tears that dimmed his eyes he saw his sister rock herself to and fro in a frenzy of agitation, "but do learn henceforward to be merciful to the weaknesses of others."

There was another pause, broken finally by Robert, who, in an abrupt, husky voice, gave utterance to the thought that was in the minds of all.

"Who is the next heir, pa, now the poor little girl is *dead*?" and he shuddered as he said the word.

"Sir Kenelm has come in for it again," replied the Doctor, and, as he spoke, all present cast their eyes upon the ground.

All this while, old Oscar, who had been driven from the Banqueting Hall—Oscar, for

whose life Dolly would have pleaded on the morrow, Oscar, faithful to the family which for generations his ancestors had served—watched in the deserted room by the side of the orphan girl, licking the cold hands and the little blood-stained face with its half-opened eyes and awful smile of peace. He had taken the post of guardian and watcher so naturally, that the old woman from the village, whose office it was to usher the Rotherhame people into the world, and decently to superintend their exit, and who, had duly come up, summoned by the affrighted servants to inspect the corpse, did not even suggest that he should be driven away. So that night Oscar left his young master's burial place unvisited, and the pale moon, rising high in the wintry heaven, peeped in through the oriel window on the fair dead child, and on the faithful dog watching at her feet.

Next day a coroner's inquest gave verdict of accidental death, occasioned by a fall that had fractured the skull. But no inquest could throw light on the cause of the catastrophe, whether the fatal slip had indeed been purely accidental, or whether, as Mrs. Bradshaw's self-reproachful fears cruelly suggested, the child's access of anguished terror had unnerved her, and suddenly losing her head upon the stairs, she had missed her footing, and, with one vain cry for help, had fallen to rise no more. But peace! What-

ever the occasion of her early and tragic end, henceforth no vision of affright shall evermore vex the soul of little Dolly, gathered gently to the Breast of Him—

Whose Arms Eternal are young children's Home.

Lady Rotherhame's tenure of the honours and properties of her ancestors had been of very brief duration—the legal process even by which these were to be secured to herself and her heirs for ever had scarcely been begun—but in their last resting place a niche was found for her. The tiny coffin, with its coronet and engraved list of high-sounding titles, was followed to its burial by a long train of mourners, members of the Bradshaw and Bogle families, the tenantry and servants. Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw, however, were not allowed the honour of acting chief mourners. As the coffin was borne into the black-draped church, a murmur passed through the crowd at the door, and a huge dog, forcing a path through the people, pushed past the Bradshaws, and took his stand by the open vault. Oscar had come to pay his little dead mistress the last tribute of a reverent farewell.

L'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose!

CHAPTER XXIV.

Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs out the roughest day.

THAT something out of the common was going forward in the city of St. Dunstan's on the afternoon of the fifteenth of March, in the Year of our Lord '18— was evident to the most casual observer. Shopmen were standing at their doors, obviously more intent on what was passing in the old-fashioned High Street than on attending to their customers. Indeed there were no customers to attend to, and the interior of the shops were empty and deserted. The windows were all alive with eager faces, and, braving the whistling blasts of the harsh east wind, and the clouds of gritty March dust which swirled in unguarded eyes and mouths, a large crowd had collected, growing denser in the direction of a tall brick building, whose approach was guarded by policemen with rods. A stream of people descending its steps poured out to mingle with the waiting mob on the straw-covered road, and a tumult of talk arose from a thousand tongues—talk apparently so absorbing, that the shouts of coachmen, endeavouring to force a passage towards their mistresses, went contemptuously unheeded, and ladies in sealskin coats and silk trains were jostled, driven back, and elbowed

with appalling lack of ceremony by white-wigged lawyers, red-faced farmers, and the dirtiest of the St. Dunstons' riff-raff. Presently a party of javelin-men, making a concerted rush, forced a way through the crowd, and a splendid coach, containing a shrewd dignified-looking personage in scarlet and ermine, and a gentleman in gay uniform, passed slowly through a lane of open-mouthed spectators. A whisper went round, "The Sheriff's carriage—the Judge!" and then, as the equipage disappeared from sight in the direction of the Minster, and the conviction gained ground that nothing more was to be seen, the populace began slowly to thin, dispersing up and down the winding streets. Some hurried off to fetch traps from the White Leopard and Rotherhame Arms, others gathered at the Guildhall round omnibusses specially chartered for the occasion by neighbouring villages, and the county people lingered in their carriages before shop doors, discussing with barristers and magnates the great event of the day—the *trial*—for admission to which they had fought tooth and nail, or waited willingly for many weary hours.

The atmosphere of the crowded Assize Court had been so oppressive, that the cold rough air of the streets was a welcome change, and passing from carriage to carriage, and among all the knots of chattering people which gathered everywhere in twos and threes,

nothing could be heard but discussion on the bearing of the prisoner, the severe homily with which the Judge had prefaced his sentence, the verdict of the jury, and the manner in which counsel and witnesses had conducted themselves.

Suddenly a gentleman on horseback, enveloped in a thick great-coat, drew rein before some country people who were awaiting the coming of the carrier's cart, and, in a voice whose trembling eagerness suggested that he was personally involved in the answer, asked—

"The trial over already? The sentence, gentlemen! What is the sentence?"

"Acquitted on the charge of murder, but convicted of being accessory after the fact, sir," answered a well-dressed tradesman, in clear, emphatic accents, while with one voice the group of rustics added the information desired—

"Seven years' penal servitude, sir. We saw him sentenced."

"My!" added a stout young woman, in a shiny silk skirt, "didn't he colour up when the Judge spoke so sharp to him? Lor, it's an awful punishment for a lord, to be sure! ain't it, Mary Jane?"

A deadly pallor crept over the rider's face, and he would have passed on had not at that moment a clergyman in a large shovel-hat and gaiters stepped forward from the pavement.

"Mr. Daubeny!" he exclaimed, in tones of sorrowful recognition.

"Archdeacon Egerton!"

And, then, as the two clergymen clasped hands, there was a moment of silence, each looking the other gravely and sadly in the face.

"Can you spare time for a little talk with me?" asked the Archdeacon. "I have often wished to come across you again."

"With pleasure," rejoined Daubeny, and, dismounting, he gave his horse into the charge of a labouring-man standing near. "Come down Wilton Street, if you don't mind; we shall talk more easily there, and I have not much time to spare." He added softly, "I must get back to my poor children, who will be counting the moments to my return. I would not for worlds that this news should reach them in my absence."


"The children!" exclaimed the Archdeacon, mournfully. "Ah! poor dear things! They are here then?"

"Not here, but at Wembridge," answered Mr. Daubeny, naming a sea-town a few miles distant. "Their father wished them to be at hand that he might bid them good-bye after the trial, and the Secretary of State, who is an old friend of his, promised them a private interview, whatever the sentence might be. God help them and me too, for I know not how I shall endure to see them parted! We thought," he con-

tinued, after a moment's silence, "that it would be better to keep them out of the way of all the crowds and excitement, and they are in a quiet little lodging in Sea View Buildings, where the good old landlady keeps the secret of their name, and they are able to maintain perfect privacy."

"When did you come down?" asked the Archdeacon.

"We started from London yesterday, and arrived by night to avoid observation. Lord Rotherhame has been away from us, in custody, for the last two months, and I have had a dreadful time to go through with the children. He has been allowed to see his friends, and has received every kindness. I have been almost daily with him, but he would not let them come. He insisted that I should remain with them during the day to help keep them up, but I found it hard work, and the little ones were inconsolable, though I assured them they should see him again. He had prepared them some days previously, as gently as he could, for what was coming, but while he was actually with them, I don't think they were able to take it in. Oh, what we have lost!" exclaimed Daubeny, tears filling his eyes. "I think, Archdeacon, even his bitterest foes would feel pitiful if they had been with Lord Rotherhame as I have the last few weeks, seeing the fruits which repentance has borne in him, his



self-sacrificing concealment of his own sorrows, and his constant care for everyone about him. The idea of all they will drag him through is almost unbearable to me, but yet, however degrading the circumstances that surround him, I know that nothing can make him other than the high-bred gentleman he is."

"Indeed I have felt the deepest sympathy for him since the letters you wrote me at the time of the poor boy's death and afterwards," said the Archdeacon, moved by Daubeny's evident emotion. "The evil he has done, though it has entailed such terrible consequences on himself and others, may well be less in the unerring sight of God, Who knows the fearful force of sudden strong temptation, than the sins of back-biting, selfishness, and want of charity, which we daily commit almost with indifference. And I must own that I was very favourably impressed with his conduct, poor fellow, throughout this trying day, which, to a man of his temperament, must have been an ordeal of no common awfulness."

"His Maker only knows how awful. Thank God, acute misery stupifies after a while. But you were there, Archdeacon? You saw him! Tell me how he looked, how he bore it all!"

"He looked the last man to be standing in a criminal dock," said the Archdeacon, sighing, "and indeed, Daubeny, there was

something so stately in his air that the counsel for the Crown, when he looked at him before beginning his crushing speech for the prosecution, stumbled, and seemed for a moment at a loss how to proceed. When he was first brought in everyone sprang to their feet—you never knew such a sensation as there was—and yet such a hush that you might have heard a pin drop. I could see he came in determined not to betray emotion by look or sign, but the blood is a thing one cannot control, and while he stood there, sustaining the gaze of all those immovable eyes, I saw him change colour again and again.”

“Did he ever look about him?” asked Daubeny, and added bitterly, “If he did, he must have recognised many former friends. I see all the world and his wife are making holiday to-day, my Lord Fitzcharles of course included.”

“He gave one—as I thought—rather haughty look round the Court, but his eyes soon dropped, and when they brought a chair he sat a long while with his elbows on the bar, shading his eyes with his hand. I suppose, as you say, intensity of emotion does in a measure stupify, for after the first he appeared to me like a man in a dream, hardly conscious of what was going on around him.”

“He must have looked beautiful!” exclaimed Daubeny impulsively. “Forgive me,

Archdeacon," he added with a smile. "I am sure you will think me very sentimental, but my health has forced me to lead an isolated life, and the few people I have really cared for I believe I have almost idolised. Had my capacity only equalled my devotion, I might so have influenced him that he would never have committed the sin which he must now atone so bitterly."

"I am sure you have no cause to reproach yourself," said the Archdeacon warmly. "We ought not to burden ourselves too heavily with the responsibilities of others, and I feel convinced that no efforts on your part were wanting. The half-hour while the jury were considering their verdict, Daubeney, was a harrowing time. Most people seemed rather glad to be released from the tension of listening, and I noticed a great deal of eating and chattering going on—a rather repulsive spectacle! To me the suspense was something awful, and after the prolonged strain of waiting, you can't think how the rapidity of the final moments took one's breath away."

"It is a comfort to know," interrupted Daubeney, with a choke in his voice, "that there lay nothing behind to be discovered—that they could bring no guilt home to him but that which he had himself spontaneously confessed."

"While he was listening to the verdict, and during the judge's address before the

sentence," resumed the Archdeacon, "he returned his gaze with something of defiance. But when the Judge began to speak in plain, downright language of the dishonourable nature of his offence, the meanness of wronging a child, he slowly drooped his eyes, as though shame overwhelmed him, and then, as if it were impossible to hold up his head, sank it on his hands upon the bar. It was difficult to see that unmoved. I admired the firmness of the Judge, who calmly said his say out, though I could see that to him even it was a task of difficulty. And when the prisoner left the Court I noticed that he returned his bow with quite a courteous salutation. Every one, in fact, down even to the meanest little Court official, treated your friend with respect, but I couldn't help thinking to myself how powerless were those courtesies to soften the grim fact that he was entering on seven long years of degrading penal servitude."

"It will be a wonder if he outlives it," said Daubeny, in a voice of anguish. "I shall see him once again, and then, perhaps, no more. Indeed, death in prison would be the kindest fate that could befall him, for how could he ever show his face again after seven years of convict life? And yet I shudder to think of his dying without one friend near to close his eyes."

"Well, well," said the Archdeacon, soothingly, "he is in the hands of a good

God, to Whose care we may safely leave him. And in all the troubles that have come so thickly upon him, poor fellow, I think we may trace a yet deeper depth of mercy, leading him from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. There is one tribunal, thank God, where we need never fear a harsh judgment. You know—

There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given.'

"You yourself speak of him more leniently than I should have thought possible, considering who was the victim he injured most. Does Miss Egerton, I wonder, feel as little embittered against him? Does she ever mention his name?"

"Indeed, yes; she has spoken with perfect frankness to me of late, and now"—here the Archdeacon paused as if uncertain whether to say what was on his mind or not, and then, apparently deciding against it, finished his sentence with—"She was too deeply attached to him, Daubeney, ever to judge him harshly, and, as I said before, since we had your letters, we—her parents—have learnt also to think more kindly of the man, against whom, for our darling's sake, we were once very bitterly incensed. But now, what about the poor old woman, Mrs. Weedon? Do you think—tell me in confidence—that she did anything to hasten her end?"

"I was doubtful on the point," said Daubeny," till the coroner's jury, after a careful medical investigation, affirmed that her death was entirely due to natural causes. Excessive over-excitement, and the tension of these last months, had, no doubt, injured the heart, and unhappily last spring she was far from temperate. She only lived two weeks after we came to London. The shock of the uprooting from the old soil strained her strength to the utmost, and Lord Rotherhame's arrest finished her. Only the afternoon before her death she had been to see him in his cell. I went with her, and when at the parting I saw her grey head bowed on his shoulder, and her wrinkled cheek wet with his tears, I felt certain they would never meet again. She was calm, but there was death upon her face. A few hours later she died, very quietly, dropping out of life from no apparent cause. There was a strange devotion between those two, so widely sundered by birth and circumstance, and she loved him with all the concentrated passion of a strong narrow nature, which education has not taught to reason or expand. I think Lord Rotherhame was glad, hard as the parting was, to know her quietly in her grave, safe from the molestation of the law."

"One of the most touching sights I have ever seen," said the Archdeacon, "was the appearance of her son Charles in the witness-box to-day. He caught sight of the prisoner

as he turned to answer the first question of the counsel, and sobbed so violently that for some time it was impossible to understand what he said. His behaviour contrasted very favourably with that of his brother, the policeman. What a consequential braggadocio that fellow is! I was delighted to hear him thoroughly well snubbed by the Judge and barristers."

Daubeney smiled.

"Charles is a very good fellow," he said. "He returned from America at Lord Rotherhame's own request, and has been for some weeks with us in London, doing two-thirds of the work of the house."

He was interrupted by the sudden advent of Mr. Springfield, a bald-headed, pink-faced attorney, who had been entrusted by Lord Rotherhame with the conduct of his case.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, taking off his hat with an air of bustling importance and mystery, "I thought I could not be mistaken—it is the Reverend Edward Daubeney. I am at this moment on my way to the station with a note for you, believing you to be at Wembridge."

Daubeney glanced at the envelope—it was directed in Lord Rotherhame's hand.

"From my client, yes," said Mr. Springfield, rubbing his fat little hands together. "Yes, Mr. Daubeney, I have come from his Lordship, and his wish was that I should run down to Wembridge, and deliver this

into your hands. He is keeping up very well, sir; very well, indeed—really, his Lordship is quite wonderful.”

“The Ladies Harold were anxious that I should come up and hear all I could about their father,” said Daubeny, opening the note.

He handed it to the Archdeacon when he had run through it, and Dr. Egerton read as follows :—

“DEAR DAUBENY,—

“I must say good-bye to the children at once, as I believe I am to be taken from St. Dunstan’s early to-morrow. So bring them up this evening by the earliest train you can catch. Springfield will tell you all particulars.

“Ever yours,

“R. AND B.”

“P.S.—Try to prepare them a little more—I feel I have not said enough to them. You will all, I hope, return to London by the last train to-night.”

“Shall you send for them?” inquired the Archdeacon.

“Let me see,” said Daubeny, consulting his watch, “a train comes up from Wembridge at 5.10, does it not, Mr. Springfield? They might just catch that if I telegraphed at once.”

He turned immediately into the post-office, followed by the lawyer and the Archdeacon.

The telegram despatched, he said that he should order a fly and meet the train himself.

"Driving, they are less likely to be recognised than on foot," he added, "and the twilight will soon be falling."

The Archdeacon begged to be allowed to accompany him to the station.

"I must go back to my hotel in the interim," he said, "for I have someone there expecting me; but I should so like to see the dear children, and say a word or two to comfort them."

Daubeny hesitated. The family had so learnt to look upon itself as isolated, a kind of Ishmael among the families of the earth, that the notion of a stranger's mixing in their affairs was at first startling. But one glance at the Archdeacon's kind, anxious face decided him, and he accepted his offer with cordial thanks.

"And then, when the interview is over, you must let them come to my rooms at the 'White Leopard.' If they are to go up to London by the night train it would be labour lost for them to travel all the way back to Wembridge first. And the less they are exposed to this bitter March wind the better. We will have a blazing fire and a comfortable tea to welcome the poor little souls, and they can be alone or with us exactly as they feel inclined."

"You are very good," said Daubeny. "I think I can answer for the little ones that

your proposal will be most acceptable, and it may be better for Lettice also to have to rouse herself a little, though that we shall do well to leave to her own decision. But how about their luggage? nothing is packed yet."

"Leave all that to me," said Mr. Springfield. "My good wife will go down to Sea View Buildings with pleasure, and do everything for the young ladies; and I will undertake that your boxes shall be all in the cloak-room ready for your departure by the 10.20."

Daubeney thanked the lawyer, and, affairs being thus satisfactorily settled, was turning his steps to the "Rotherhame Arms," whence he intended to order the fly, when the Archdeacon stopped him, and, drawing him a little on one side, whispered something in his ear.

Daubeney started, and flushed, while a gleam shot into his eyes.

"Can it really be?" was all the curious Springfield could hear him say, and then his further speech was lost in another whisper.

"We meet at the station, then, in half an hour," he said, aloud, at last. "Good-evening, Mr. Springfield, though we shall, perhaps, see each other again within the next few hours. I shall be at the "White Leopard" between eight and ten o'clock."

Half an hour later the Archdeacon, making his punctual way towards the

place of rendezvous, found the platform crowded with persons eagerly awaiting the coming of the up-train. The assizes were nearly over, and the Judge of the criminal court, having concluded his business, had left a learned brother to settle wrangles about by-lanes and bridges, and was going off himself incognito to enjoy a day's holiday by the sea. He was dressed in plain clothes, with a large great-coat and tall grey hat, but despite all disguises, the majesty of the law was stamped upon his commanding lips and broad open brow, and to any critical observer he was unmistakably a Judge. The light of the gas fell full on his face as, endeavouring to keep warm by brisk exercise, he walked past the two clergymen, and, interchanging a glance of recognition, both he and Daubeney removed their hats.

"Why, that was the Judge!" exclaimed the Archdeacon. "Do you know him personally, Daubeney?"

"He has been twice on this circuit before," returned Daubeney, with a painful smile, "and on each occasion has dined with Lord Rotherham. They were very pleasant evenings, I remember; I wonder whether he recalled them to-day in Court!"

The Archdeacon, whom this information struck with new force as a powerful illustration of the transitory nature of earthly things, groaned afresh. Daubeney also sighed.

"It is fortunate for my health of mind

that I shall have abundance of work to occupy me," he presently resumed; "work, too, of a kind more congenial than forcing Christianity on the unwilling inhabitants of the London slums. I fear there is a great want of benevolence and width of sympathy in me, Archdeacon—I cannot bring myself to find the happiness in mission-work that I should, as the minister of God. To come into contact, day after day, with coarse, illiterate, turbulent natures, seems to me like a perpetual mental skinning, a laying bare of all the nerves and fibres of the mind. It is so hard to recognise the degraded drunkard as a man and brother, or to feel any enthusiasm for humanity when seen under such repulsive forms. Distasteful, too, to have to drive our holy religion, that most sacred and priceless Bread of Life, down the throats of those who are unwilling to receive it."

"Ah! your long delicacy, and the constant companionship of refined, cultivated minds, has unfitted you a little, I fear, for battling with the rough world. But you are not going to desert your new parish already, are you? Give it a fair trial, and I think you will find that gradually a sincere affection will grow up within you for the poor starving souls you are sent to feed."

"You do not know, then, what my new work is to be?" said Daubeny, surprised. "Why, Archdeacon, I am to have three

orphanages under my jurisdiction. Yes, it seems a serious undertaking for one so unbusinesslike as I am said to be, but yet it will be one of absorbing interest."

"Three orphanages! Where are they? and how have you obtained a post of such responsibility?"

"In this way. My dear friend is desirous of paying back into God's treasury the entire revenue of the years during which he deprived the orphan of her inheritance. The sum amounts, at a rough estimate, to about three hundred and fifty thousands, and is gradually to be paid over to build and endow these orphanages. The mother-house is to be in London, its branches in different parts of the country. You will understand that, hampered by the repayment of this great debt, my poor children will not boast large means for the next eight or nine years, but we have taken a good-sized house in one of the old Bloomsbury squares, and there we shall live in strict privacy. The Duchess of Naseby, who has only just returned from the East, most kindly volunteered to take charge of the children, and defray the expenses of their education. She is a generous-minded woman, and does not shrink from the scandal of giving open protection to a convict's family; perhaps she knows the world too well to set a very high value on its good opinion. But their father knew that in the Duchess's household the contrast

between their natural rank and the disgrace that had fallen on the family would be more painfully apparent to them, so he preferred that they should be brought up in quiet seclusion, out of reach of that Society which to the fallen is so unmerciful, and possesses such cruel powers of torture."

"He could not have decided better. I am thankful that they are to be under your care," said the Archdeacon, with fervour. "Society in the present day is so interpenetrated with mean ideas of every kind, that they will gain as much in refinement by keeping apart from it, as in comfort by having for their guardian one who has always been a second father to them."

"Do you remember Josceline Murray-Carr, the funny boy, who was always doing himself injustice by propounding preposterous opinions on social and religious questions?"

"Perfectly, and a very good fellow he was too! spite of the nonsense he talked."

"I should like to tell you of the kind manly way in which he came forward a few weeks ago to ask Lettice's hand—that shows the good stuff there is in him! Lord Rotherham will not at present hear of it, for his father's sake, to whom, as he said, the connection would be hardly creditable. My idea is, however, that the Bishop's scruples, if he has any, would be very easily overcome. He is a warm-hearted man, and he is one of those who has fallen a complete victim to the

fascination which Lord Rotherhame undoubtedly exercises over not a few of his fellow-creatures."

Daubeny said this proudly, as if he rejoiced to come between the friend he loved and the stones flung at him by a scornful world.

The train came in, and as Daubeny hurried along the platform searching for his charges, he saw the Judge standing before the door of a first-class carriage, from which, with grave, pitying politeness, he was helping two fair little girls in mourning to alight, the children of the man whom he had that day sentenced to penal servitude.

Lord Rotherhame's daughters were closely veiled, yet even so they seemed to shrink nervously from recognition, and hurried after Mr. Daubeny to the protection of the shabby vehicle which awaited them outside the station. At the first sight of the Archdeacon, they drew back shyly, but, long before they reached the "White Leopard," where they were to put him down, his warm fatherly manner had reassured them, and the scared silent children had come to feel that they might rely on him for sympathy and protection.

CHAPTER XXV.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough hew them as we will.

SHAKESPEARE.

The black minute's at end !
And the element's rage, the fiend voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,—
Shall change, shall become, first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O, thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest !

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE blinding sleet was falling fast, and the shrill night-wind blew fiercely, when a few minutes later the porter of St. Dunstan's Gaol carefully unbarred his iron-studded doors, and admitted Mr. Daubeney and his charge within their guarded precincts. The party were expected, and the porter cast but a formal glance at the order for their admission, signed by the Secretary of State.

Little Edward, as he passed for the first time beneath the gateway where the gallows had so often been erected, could not repress a shudder, and clung tightly to Lettice's hand. A warder came forward and led them up a broad gravel walk, on either side of which stunted-looking shrubs had been planted, and grass sown, which grew up in rank coarse patches above the nameless unloved graves in which the bodies of the executed were mouldering, forgotten. On the

left hand stood the sturdy sombre gaol, with its rows of small barred windows; on the right the ground sloped down to a high iron-spiked wall, beyond which could be dimly seen, through the sleet and gathering darkness, the black mass of the Rotherhame woods with their majestic summit of cloud-capped

Now a word was spoken, and the warder, opening the prison door, and sounding a large bell, the echoed with dismal clang along the stone whitewashed passages, showed them into a small apartment on the right. The prisoner entered tremblingly that its walls were furnished with manacles and hand-cuffs, and they gathered close round Mr.

The warder begged them civilly to sit down, and the governor would join them in a few minutes. In the meantime a small

"I am a poor old man," said Mr. [unclear], who, shivering, sat down upon the bench. "If you keep up, I will mainly [unclear] find this [unclear] of the [unclear]"

"I am a poor old man," said Mr. [unclear], who, shivering, sat down upon the bench. "If you keep up, I will mainly [unclear] find this [unclear] of the [unclear]"

"Summon up all your resolution, Lettice. You would never forgive yourself in after years, if you wasted this opportunity of seeing him and strengthening him. Forget your own feelings, dear, for his sake! See, here is Mr. Heatherstone."

The Governor of St. Dunstan's Gaol entered as he said the words. He was a tall man, with thin, severe lips, and iron grey hair, but he looked with compassionate, respectful interest on the unfortunate young girls, who, in their turn, regarded him with solemn awe, as an official of unlimited importance and authority.

"Mr. Heatherstone, I believe," said Daubeney. "These young ladies bring an order from the Home Secretary for a private interview with Lord Rotherhame. Would it be convenient for his Lordship to see them now?"

"Visitors are not usually admitted after five o'clock, but in the present case I am sure no objection would be made," and the Governor glanced at the order handed him by Daubeney.

"If these ladies will wait one moment I will send to warn his Lordship to expect them."

He whispered to a turnkey outside the door, and then returning, said courteously—

"Perhaps in the interim you would kindly favour me by entering your names in this book," and as Lettice started, regarding even the most trivial details of prison cere-

monial with horror and suspicion, he added, in a reassuring tone, "It is always customary for visitors to sign their names in our book, and if your Ladyship will glance back I dare say you will find many that you know."

He was turning over the leaves to show her that the formidable volume was no list of criminals, but contained the names of the most respectable persons in the neighbourhood, when the words "Rotherhame and Berkeley" caught his eye, followed by the names of various distinguished strangers whom his Lordship had once brought to while away a wet afternoon in gaol-inspection. Mr. Heatherstone hurriedly turned back to the blank sheet.

"If you wish, sir, you can sign for the ladies," he said, and Daubeny had scarcely concluded his task, when the turnkey tapped at the door and whispered a few words in the Governor's ear.

"Very good!" he replied. "Now ladies, if you please, this way—your papa is quite ready to receive you. Kindly follow that person."

The turnkey, whose benevolent face was steeped in solemn sympathy, touched his hat, as Lettice—ice cold—obeyed the Governor's request, and came forward, holding the little ones by the hand. As the small procession filed slowly out, Daubeny fell back and said softly—

"Is he calm, Mr. Heatherstone?"

"He was so, perfectly, but the warder tells me he turned faint when he heard the young ladies had arrived, and asked for brandy. I am very sorry for his Lordship, Mr. Daubeny, as sorry as any man can be, but the law's the law, you see, and in common justice can make no difference in its operation between high and low, rich and poor."

"Does he go away to-morrow?"

"Early to-morrow, so my instructions are, for we are sending a batch of prisoners to Millbank that were convicted at these assizes."

Daubeny's face contracted, and he moved on. As he disappeared through the door, two other snow-plashed figures came in out of the darkening night and stood silently within the prison hall.

Meanwhile the kind-hearted turnkey was endeavouring to divert and cheer the poor little children by pointing out to them the spotless and ghastly cleanliness of the floors and walls, along which through a bolted door they passed into the inner precincts of the prison.

It had long been Edward's ambition to penetrate the mysteries of St. Dunstan's Gaol, an ambition which his father's fears, lest the sight should prove too harrowing, had prevented him from gratifying, and even at this moment he could not forbear peeping about him for a glimpse of the famous treadmill, whose horrors Josceline and Ralph had

graphically described to him. Lettice felt as though she must be dreaming, it was so utterly impossible to connect the thought of her father with this disciplined mean-looking House of Correction, and a sensation of almost intolerable sickness seized her when she met a prisoner, who, dressed in his coarse low uniform, was following with cowed, yet dogged look, a gaoler towards the punishment-cells.

Could it be that he, her father, would herd with creatures like that? O, she would have given her life to save him from the vile fate, and the sense of her utter powerlessness maddened her. Bowed down with shame and misery, she followed on through a large room, filled with what seemed like the high pews of an old fashioned church, whose walls were adorned with printed orders to prisoners to maintain strict silence, and not to turn their heads, interspersed with texts of a severe order, representing God in the character of an especially hard magistrate, in close league with the gaol authorities. Beyond this dreary and now empty apartment lay a narrow passage, with rows of grated doors, and at one of these the turnkey stopped, and producing his big key, applied it to the lock.

Lettice recoiled, but Daubeney grasped her by the arm, and feeling it necessary to rouse her, bade her authoritatively "Go in." The

next moment she was in her father's presence. Lord Rotherhame was standing beneath a tiny grated window, in a whitewashed cell, measuring about seven feet by ten, and boasting as furniture a bed of planks, a minute table, and a shelf bearing a Bible and one other book. A copy of the prison-regulations hung upon the wall, and on the table were writing materials with which he had apparently been occupying himself. As his daughters stole in, one by one, he kept his eyes fixed upon the ground, as though some leaden weight were on them. There was a look on the familiar face which made it strange, almost unrecognisable to his children—the look of a strong man in agony, whose strength and endurance are being drawn on to the uttermost. He struggled to speak, but his lips seemed incapable of utterance. Lettice came up to him with an expression of untold anguish.

“Father!” she said at last, and held out both her hands to him.

“Yes, Lettice,” he answered, after a moment's silence, and there was a terrible break in his voice.

Then he drew her to him, and imprinted one burning kiss upon her brow.

There was another silence, broken only by a confused sound of heaving hearts. Then little Cicely came forward, and overcoming her first awe of the strange scene enacting

round her, looked up into her father's bloodless face with undiminished, fearless confidence.

"Does father like his funny little room, and his wood bed?" she asked.

"Lettice! *don't* cry!" exclaimed Lord Rotherhame, in a tone of such passionate beseeching that the girl's tears which were springing up at her little sister's words dried within her eyes. "Yes, darling," he answered, with concentrated tenderness, and laying his long white fingers on the child's curling hair, "I like my room very well, it is cold and small, but it is good enough for me." And as he observed the glances of horror which the little children cast upon the hard pillowless plank bed, he added, in a low voice of such intense reverence, that everyone present bowed their heads: "Jesus Christ made His bed on a hard Cross, Cicely. You must not mind if father has to do like Him."

Cicely looked up with that clear, searching gaze with which children see deep into mysteries that older eyes are powerless to fathom. It seemed as if she would read her father through.

"You never talked of Jesus Christ before, father," she said at last. "I didn't know you loved Him."

Lord Rotherhame stood abashed before the penetration of this little child. He remembered that, though he had rejoiced

that his children should learn from others the truths of the Church's Holy Faith, he, himself, loaded with the burden of unrepented sin, had never dared speak to them the Sacred Name. With others—clergymen and men of science—he had freely discussed the Deity, and the great religious problems on which mankind is divided; but to have given his little ones the simplest lesson in Christian truth would have seemed to him an act of sacrilege.

"I love Him now," he answered gravely, and glancing at Daubeny, who stood close by with drooping head, "I love Him, because He, the best of men, is almost the only one Who does not turn from me now with hatred. You must love Him too, my child; you must all of you try to serve and obey Him, then you will be safe. I want you to do this one last thing for me as well, my little ones. Mr. Daubeny is to be your new father, and you must all be sure—Edward in particular—to do everything he tells you. Remember, Eddy, you are your sisters' only brother now, and you must take care of them and protect them, like a good brave boy, and never do anything unworthy of a gentleman."

"I'll never rest till I've managed for you to escape!" said Edward, vehemently. "Never fear, daddy, we'll work night and day. I've got the box of tools you gave me, and heaps of splendid plots in my head

already, which I haven't told one of the girls even!"

Lord Rotherhame smiled, and looked round on the young faces about him with a look of yearning love, which quickly faded into agony.

"Lettice," he said, "you are the eldest, now mind what I tell you. I wish these children to forget me. Don't talk to them about me, and by degrees let my name be dropped among you—the less they are reminded of my existence, the less chance of their coming one day to hate me! Poor, poor little creatures, your father's shadow must dog you and be your curse through life, but I would trouble you as little as is possible, and in a new land, with another name, my existence might be gradually forgotten, and you might think of me pitifully, as of the dead."

Scarcely understanding his meaning, but catching the infection of his half-repressed emotion, the children sobbed out that they never could or would forget their father. The scene had become agitating and painful beyond endurance, and Lord Rotherhame, whose strength had been taxed to the utmost, recognised that he could bear it no longer.

"And now you must all go," he said, in a voice in which assumed cheerfulness fought with despair. "Come Lettice, you are the mother-bird, and must not allow your little ones to be overdone before their long night

journey. Kiss me, darlings, and say good-bye."

"Not yet! oh father, not yet! we cannot leave you," and little arms, and soft hands clasped him everywhere—clinging hands, which even when forced open, closed again about him. He tried to put them from him, but in vain, and kisses rained thick and fast upon his face and hands, as sunshine falls for the last time on the eyes of one who is to be put to death.

With effort releasing an arm, he grasped Daubeny's sleeve and whispered—

"For God's sake, Daubeny, take them from me!"

The gaoler who had been waiting outside came in on hearing these words, and in his rough yet kindly way, aided Mr. Daubeny to take the weeping children from their father. Lettice was the last to leave him, and when her drooping head was lifted from his shoulder, and she looked at him for the last time through tear-drowned eyes as Daubeny carried her away, she saw that white had begun to mingle with the dark auburn of his locks.

They were gone! and a horror of darkness came over the prisoner-father as he realised that he was alone. Life—the warm glad life of human care and love, had faded from him—he breathed the atmosphere of death and desolation. He stretched out his arms towards the door whence they had gone out—

lônging, open arms, whose emptiness was mocked by the unsubstantial prison air. And as, at last, sight returned to his eyes, which pain had blinded, and which now thirsted with a thirst no more to be satisfied for the sweet faces that had vanished, he uttered a sudden cry. A slight form stood within the door, veiled, and cloaked in grey.

“Kenelm!”

“Geraldine!”

A moment, and he was clasped in her arms—arms strong, protecting, loving, almost mother-like in their enfolding warmth. The proud strong man was broken down at last, and sobs, passionate, deep, and awful, shook the silence of the prison cell.

She put up her hand, and brushed back his hair, caressing and soothing him as though he were a distressed child.

“O, Geraldine, my heart is broken!” he said at last. “Why did you come to see me thus?”

“Ralph left you to me, Kenelm,” she answered, softly. “The night before he died he wrote to me, and what he said gave me my first hope that in your dear heart there was some place left for me. Nothing but the dread that I should weary and encumber you, add to your burthen instead of lightening it, could have ever kept me from you. You must not, shall not, grieve like this, Kenelm. Seven years! what a drop that is in the life of man! they will pass, and you

will grant me one joy to bear me through my weary waiting—the promise that you will come to me straight when the time has passed, as pass it must at last.”

“Oh, Geraldine, that can never be! If I live till that day—which God forbid, for others’ sakes, as well as mine,—I must go away, far off, where I shall never see again a face that I have known—where I shall not be near my children to disgrace them. They will not hear it now, but they will live to own that I am right. God demands of me a total sacrifice—I must keep back nothing, not even my own children!”

“You *have* kept back nothing; you have been willing to offer all to God, and in return He gives you sevenfold. From me, a love and devotion which will follow you in life and death; from your children, a tenderness made deeper by the knowledge that you suffer—are they heartless, inhuman, that they should abandon their father in his deepest need?—from your wife, to whom you have now drawn nearer in soul than ever when you clasped her in your arms on earth, a transport of grateful joy. Is not *His* smile something to have gained, my Kenelm? is it nothing that in your dreary solitude His love will be with you, encompassing you like an atmosphere? and our love, which He has given you abundantly? And never think that I would steal you from her—your Mary! I give you up to her, content if only you are happy. I

think, I pray—that she herself will let me be her friend, when she sees me glad to throw down life at your feet, thankful to tread even the dreariest waste, if I may in spirit follow and be near you, whom I love better than all the world beside!”

“Does your father know you have come to me? my gentle, compassionate, angel-child, whom I injured so deeply, and who have for me in return words of mercy and hope only too perilously sweet! Go back to him and tell him what you have done; he could not be angry with a deed which sprang from such a divine impulse of pity. Go back now, dear Geraldine! it has comforted me beyond all that words can say to know I have your pardon, and to be able to carry with me into my new life a fresh picture of your dear face, to blot out the accusing memory of the look it wore that awful day we parted.”

“Yes, I must leave you,” she answered, a brave light coming into her resolute eyes. “I *must* leave you, for they would compel me soon to go. And after all, why should I despair, because for a few years I lose the touch and sight of you? Since we are made of soul as well as body, death even cannot part us. But you *will* live, Kenelm?—my father has promised to give me to you,—and you *will* live for my sake, who will count the days and hours till the blessed moment when we meet once more!”

“And you will come back to me?” he

said wonderingly, while a light of love such as before she had never seen, shone solemnly from his eyes. "Can it really be, dear Diney, that you love me still?"

"Did I not give myself to you for better and for worse?" she answered, "that day when you sacrificed yourself so generously for me—give myself as completely as if we had exchanged marriage vows before the altar. Do I love you still? I only pray that I may love God more!"

He took both her hands, and looked her intently in the eyes.

"My own precious one," he said, "Ralph's gift to me from the grave, dear beyond all price—my sweet and sacred treasure. Yes, I will hope, I will live for your sake. As Jacob for Rachel, I will serve my seven years for you. May I be seven times purified that I may be more worthy of your love! Good-bye, and may God bless you for ever and for ever!"

Then he kissed her on the lips—an intense, long kiss.

The turnkey had entered the room to give warning that the time permitted for the interview was over. Lord Rotherhame sank exhausted on his knees by the table; he must offer thanks before the Unseen Presence for the new light that had come to cheer his path. Geraldine bent over him with a smile of angelic tenderness and pity. He felt her kiss, and her hands moved softly

above his head, as though she blessed him.

When at last he looked up she was gone ; the candle was extinguished, and the quiet stars were looking down on him through grated windows. He was alone in prison.

EPILOGUE.

Finis—the fittest word to end
Life's book so mystical and solemn ;
The fiat of a Roman Judge ;
The last stone of a finished column.

Finis—the saddest word of all,
Irrevocable, changeless, certain ;
The parting sigh beside the dead ;
The prompter's word to drop the curtain.

ANON.

THE personages who have passed across the stage of our drama yet being alive, we can record but little of their doings, beyond the point of history at which we have now left them. Some few facts, however, may be communicated to the spectator before they make their parting salutation. Robert Bogle is at the present moment happily married to Caroline Bradshaw, who, warned by personal experience of the vanity of human ambition and the changefulness of fortune, came to the conclusion that “a bird in the hand was worth two in a bush,” and settled down with the man of her choice in a neat brick villa in the suburbs of St. Dunstan's. Happily for the High Church party, which he had intended to honour with his patronage, Robert renounced his purpose of taking Holy Orders, and at the instance of his Uncle Standish, was articled to a thriving solicitor, whose partner he eventually became. Thanks

to this arrangement, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bogle never lacked a sufficiency of worldly goods, in spite of the disappointment which came to them at the eagerly anticipated death of Mr. Standish, in whose modern mansion and estate Robert then discovered he was not destined to bear sway. Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw, who when "duty called them" to Rotherhame Castle, had resigned their pupils and their Deerhurst benefice, found themselves on their young niece's death in the awkward predicament of being without home or income, and were glad to take the first means that offered of gaining a living—neither more nor less than a poorly paid workhouse chaplaincy. Solid comfort however came to these victims of fickle fortune in the shape of a letter from Mr. Springfield, which informed them that Lord Rotherhame, mindful that he had been the involuntary cause of their loss of preferment, had instructed him yearly to make up to them in cash the income of their former living. From the same quarter Mr. Meules received a cure of souls in St. Dunstan's, with a spacious Vicarage-house and grounds, where he now dwells with his devoted wife, and five thin light-haired boys and girls, and just outside whose gates stands a small cottage half hidden in creepers. From a latticed window in this romantic edifice, Miss Henny daily awaits with ever-recurring agitation the visits of her nieces and nephews;

here also Ann gives new life to the St. Dunstan's Bible Christian Connection, and Baby Josephine calls into being antimacassars, countless in number, fearful and wonderful in design. Whether Muzza has yet succeeded in discovering a Church after her own exalted ideal, or whether she is still hunting for it in the dark regions of Impossibility, history does not reveal. Archdeacon and Mrs. Egerton have not visited Westshire since the tragic October morning when they took their daughter from her affianced husband, and, having consequently no friendly Dr. Bogle to keep them up to the mark, have sunk beyond hope into a slough of unpracticality, unpunctuality, and short-sighted trust in human nature.

The wonderful prosperity which attends them, spite of the innumerable forgets, mistakes, and negligences, which should justly plunge them into complete confusion, seems a proof that, however anxious we mortals may be to bring ourselves to ruin, a kind, watchful Providence is bent on thwarting us. Their lost property invariably turns up; the Archdeacon's unlucky speculations are made up to him in legacies; always late for their trains, their trains never go off without them, and the bad world in which they perversely insist on believing seems in gratitude always careful to justify their good opinion. Miss Bartholomew has long since prophesied that their "reckless following of

impulse" must inevitably bear fatal fruit—but impulses vary according to the natures from which they spring, and the Egertons' never seem to bring them any worse fate than the tender ridicule and enthusiastic goodwill of kinsfolk and neighbours. Rotherhame Castle has been given over to the care of a few worn-out old servants, who, locking up and shrouding the state apartments against a brighter day, dwell together in the huge kitchens and offices, pocket such fees as sight-seers bestow upon them for their services as guides, and occasionally find occupation in entertaining large parties of convalescent invalids, sent down by Mr. Daubeny from crowded slums to recover in the pure air of heath and wood. For a year or two the place was left unvisited by any members of the Harold family; but at last, one sunny summer morning the little Lord Berkeley came down with his guardian, and revealing himself to the delighted domestics, under promise of strict secrecy, spent some hours wandering about the deserted rooms, the crumbling ruins, and the woodland surroundings of his father's home. He looked, they all said, a bright, handsome little boy, with manners merry and gracious, despite their half-veiled imperiousness, and the old people talk of him still, and long for the day when his Lordship will come among them again, and settle down in the old place with a fair young wife of his own. Mr. Daubeny's health has steadily im-

proved, though between his orphanages and his guardianship of the Harold children, his work has been far from light. Edward, though living chiefly at Grand Court with his aunt the Duchess, whose idol and darling he is, looks up to him with a semi-filial reverence, and the constant care of his grave and gentle friend goes far to keep the boy from the corrupting influence of flattery and luxurious living.

Lord and Lady Rotherhame have never yet returned to the Castle, but far off with a sweet infant who has come to soothe their exiled sadness and bind them together in the sacred joy of mutual parentage, they live secluded lives, communing with Nature in her most glorious homes, and serving God in man, with the service of cultured and comprehending sympathy. Lord Rotherhame has adhered to the mournful resolve taken in misery and remorse, that evening when, in his prison cell, he parted from his children. Never since has he beheld their faces. Name and history alike unknown, he lives apart, seeking to hide in oblivion the existence which dishonours them, and the old life with their once idolized father is fast becoming to his son and daughters a myth, a shadowy legend of the past. She, who alone of them all, would through every change have treasured his memory in faithful love, sleeps in an early grave. The sorrows and shocks of those dark months which robbed her of

brother, home, and father, broke her gentle heart, and Lettice never lived to wed with him who, when friends and acquaintances shunned her, had chivalrously longed to link his name with hers. Miss Oliver has become Mrs. Bogle, and her presence in Rotherhame Rectory adds much to the happiness of the unfortunate Ellen and Mary, in whom her experienced educational efforts have succeeded in developing some latent sparks of intelligence. One chief care of the good little lady is a certain grave, just where the red beams of sunrise fall morning after morning athwart the dewy churchyard grass, at whose head stands a cross of stone bearing this brief inscription :—

Here rests in God,

RALPH KENELM PLANTAGENET,

Eldest son of Kenelm, Earl of Rotherhame and Berkeley,

Aged eighteen years.

“He shall visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.”

“In a little wrath I hid My Face from thee for a moment, but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.”

THE END.









